

Concepts and measurement of dropout in higher education: A critical perspective from Latin America

Fernando Acevedo

Universidad de la República, Uruguay

This study identified the main explanatory factors of dropout in higher education in Rivera, Uruguay, and showed that the limitations and methodological implications related to the polysemic nature of the concept of dropout should be addressed by studies on this subject. Through a systematic search of the international scientific literature, the results showed that the main barriers were: (i) the absence of consensus of dropout in higher education in the international scientific literature; (ii) measurement of dropout rates according to individual research interests using the predominant methodological strategies and the available data (which are usually unreliable and difficult to access), instead of adopting a more conceptually and methodologically consistent definition; (iii) the nature of the data and the absence of a unique definition of dropout in higher education prevents its generalisation and/or comparison with data from other institutions and countries.

Introduction

A recent study (Acevedo, 2020) provided consistent theoretical and empirical data to develop a model for promoting higher education in unfavourable social and academic contexts, as is the case of Rivera, in north-eastern Uruguay. One of the most significant contributions of this study was determining that the main factors involved in dropout in the three higher education centres of Rivera (the Rivera University Centre, the Regional Northern Centre for Teachers, and the Rivera Teacher Training Institute) are those associated with the structure of educational and employment opportunities, especially the existence of a very limited and undiversified offer of higher education academic programs.

In effect, unlike what happens in favourable socio-academic settings, the contextual-structural factors in the region where those centres are located are decisive as explanatory factors for dropout, mainly in the first year, as well as for persistence and student success (Acevedo, 2020). These findings question the suitability and applicability, in the case of unfavourable social and academic contexts, of the two most widely accepted models in academia: the *Model of Institutional Action for Student Success* (Tinto, 2012a) and *Retention Formula and Model for Student Success* (Seidman, 2012a, 2012b).

The study design presented limitations, including the polysemic nature of the concept of dropout, which prevented conceptualisation and *operationalisation*. The neologism *operationalisation* is related to the process of precisely defining and measuring concepts or variables, which usually requires their decomposition into constitutive parts, and then choosing observable indicators (Lazarsfeld, 1985.) In this respect, it is worth noting that more than two hundred studies from high-impact journals based on the framework of this investigation did not address this limitation. However, these studies analysed several words whose relevance and meaning do not have consensus, and their use was interpreted

differently, limiting selecting data and identifying and measuring indicators in different academic contexts (Rodríguez-Gómez, Feixas, Gairín & Muñoz, 2015). Consequently, it was not possible to establish comparisons between studies.

The most commonly used words were desertion, dropout, stop-out, stopping, withdrawal, departure, attrition, leaving, abandonment, dismissal, quit, exhaustion, non-persistence, and non-completion. The connotations of these words are distinct and may indicate different situations, which requires specifying the context and limits interpretation. For instance, it may show involuntary dismissal (because the student did not comply with the administrative requirements or violated institutional regulations), voluntary abandonment of a career and enrolment in another (either in the same or another higher education centre), or neglect of studies to engage in non-academic activities (Holliman, Martin & Collie, 2018). Besides, abandonment of education can be permanent or temporary. Moreover, the context varies according to the person defining it: 'The terms retention, dropout, and attrition have been used synonymously and conjure up different visions in different people' (Seidman, 2012b, p. 270).

Finding a definition adequate to all types of dropout is unlikely and, strictly speaking, inadmissible. Spanish-speaking scholars face other difficulties when translating the original English words into their language, which already has different denotata and connotata according to the conception and intention of those who formulate or apply them. However, in both cases, there are conceptual-semantic limitations in meaning rather than terminological-lexical limitations. Therefore, developing conceptual frameworks that reduce these limitations is essential.

Methodological approach

In order to determine the different meanings attributed to the most commonly used words in the specialised literature focused on abandonment of studies in higher education, a systemic survey was undertaken, restricted to papers published between 1 January 2015 and 31 July 2018 in high-impact journals, both English and Spanish. A more thorough survey over a longer period of time was ruled out, because it would have been materially impossible; it is sufficient to consider that between 1980 and 2012 more than three million papers focused on school retention and on abandonment of studies in universities were registered in Google Scholar (Serra Hagedorn, 2012).

For the 266 journals Q1 listed by Scimago (2018) in *Journal Rankings in Education*, the keyword search words applied were the three that, according to Longden (2001), are the most employed in the specialised literature: dropout, attrition, withdrawal. 287 papers were found mentioning at least one of these three words in title, abstract or keywords. Those 287 papers are distributed in 48 journals Q1: 26 from the United Kingdom, 19 from the USA, and 3 from the Netherlands (Appendix 1). The fact that all these journals are published in English and most of them (94%) come from anglophone contexts, could introduce an apparent bias in the results. However, these journals have the highest international impact on this subject, and therefore, have an influence on the word-choice

by most of the authors from non-anglophone contexts in their papers published in Q2, Q3 or Q4 journals (i.e., dropout, attrition, withdrawal, and the corresponding translations). As such, this seems to be a bias due to the current situation in the publishing market, not in the literature search criteria.

An equivalent criterion was applied for the survey of papers in high-impact journals published in Spanish, also between 1 January 2015 and 31 July 2018. Due to the fact that in the total of 266 journals Q1 from *Journal Rankings in Education* (Scimago, 2018) only three are published in Spanish (all from Spain), the survey covered the total of the journals of the Scimago ranking. The search descriptors were the three words that, according to Munizaga, Cifuentes and Beltrán (2017), are the most employed in the specialised literature in Spanish: *deserción* (desertion), *abandono* (dropout), *retención* (retention). 94 papers in Spanish were identified with at least one of these words mentioned in title, abstract or keywords. Those 94 papers are distributed in a total of 19 journals (2 Q1, 6 Q2, 6 Q3, 5 Q4) published in Spain (11 journals) and in four American countries (5 in México, 1 in Chile, 1 in Colombia, 1 in Costa Rica) (Appendix 2).

Findings and discussion

Conceptual boundaries: Desertion, dropout, disaffiliation

The study showed that uncritical use of definitions has led to the proliferation of opinions that implicitly consider that the use of *desertion* is discriminatory, and should be avoided because of the negative connotation attributed to this word: in the military—where the term originated—desertion was an act of treason that was strongly disapproved (Díaz, 2007). However, this connotation is attributed by the speaker. It seems that many speakers inadvertently assume the Humpty-Dumpty statement: ‘When I use a word [...] it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’ (Carroll, 1871, p. 72). In this respect, discrimination is not in words but in things—there is not an essential correspondence between them, as Foucault (2005) argued half a century ago—or, according to the famous Saussurean dichotomy, is not in the language (*langue*) but in speech (*parole*) and, more specifically, in the intentionality of the speaker. Moreover, students who stop attending a higher education centre or abandon studies to perform non-academic activities are not traitors.

However, the word *desertion* does not indicate whether it involves interrupting studies in higher education or no longer being a student. Besides, this word suggests irreversibility that does not agree with a decision that may not be irreversible.

Two other expressions were adopted because of these limitations: *dropout*, that is, abandonment of studies in a higher education centre (which could eventually lead to enrolment in other courses in the same or another career); and *disaffiliation*, that is, abandonment of formal studies and disengagement from the educational system. This distinction is not merely lexical, and the possibility of distinguishing between dropout and disaffiliation is critical for designing targeted policies.

Having ruled out the term *desertion*, it is appropriate to develop conceptual boundaries between *dropout* and *disaffiliation*. Dropout is the interruption of academic studies in a higher education centre. Depending on the circumstances under which this decision is made, the interruption may occur by stopping to attend the courses started in that higher education centre, or, in the case of having completed them, by not taking the exams which if passed would have allowed course credits to be received, or, in the case of having completed the courses and taken exams, by not enrolling in other classes. In any case, the interruption of academic studies does not necessarily imply that the student has abandoned the educational system (Webb & Cotton, 2018), and interruption does not indicate disaffiliation because the student can potentially resume formal studies in a different career in the same higher education centre or a different one.

Dropout and disaffiliation are not permanent, irreversible states. The students who abandon studies can resume them later or finish them in another higher education centre. Similarly, students who disengage from the educational system, i.e., abandon studies and do not attend a higher education centre for a specified period (which is difficult to predict), can rejoin the system, except in cases of death.

Although dropout and disaffiliation are potentially reversible, the specialised literature usually attributes a definitive character to these terms, and dropout rates are determined on this basis, with several implications; for this reason, the use of these words is equivocal. Therefore, it is convenient to replace both terms with *non-completion of studies* and add a specific complement such as *non-completion of studies in an academic program*, *non-completion of studies in a higher education centre* (or non-completion of studies in an academic program and non-enrolment in other programs of that higher education centre), *non-completion of studies in every higher education centre* (or non-completion of studies in an academic program and non-enrolment in other programs of that or other higher education centres). It should be noted that the term non-completion is rare in the current literature.

Methodological implications

The conceptual boundaries between dropout and disaffiliation seem to be well-defined. Nonetheless, it is difficult to determine whether the student who decides to interrupt academic studies in the school in which he/she was enrolled considered the interruption as temporary or permanent, or whether the student disengaged from the education system, and if this were the case, if disengagement was temporary or permanent.

Tinto (2012a) has shown that the non-attendance of school (although the period is difficult to determine) is stop-out, whereas dropout indicates leaving school permanently (although the period is difficult to specify, even for the student). 'Yet, stop-out behaviour is impossible to measure, for there is no real agreement on the length of time a student can be considered a stop-out before becoming a dropout' (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012, p. 5). Therefore, researchers need to distinguish between stop-out and dropout (Tinto, 2012a), and to examine a student's decision and underlying motives to assess whether the interruption was dropout or disaffiliation.

Another difficulty is that students may not be sure whether they want to abandon studies in a specific career in a higher education centre or all careers in all centres. Additionally, the student may not know the duration of the interruption. The lack of decision about this issue prevents determining the type of disruption.

Two methodological approaches can be used to overcome these difficulties. One of them is ignoring the reasons underlying students' decisions, restricting the inquiry almost exclusively to the analysis of data from the administrative records of higher education centres. For instance, students who did not develop academic activities for a specified period (this period is usually set by the researchers to 1 year) are considered to have dropped out from this higher education centre. To determine whether it is disaffiliation, then it is enough, albeit difficult, to verify whether, in this period (or a more extended period, usually set to 2 years), students have not attended other centres of the same level (in the same region or country). Note that this type of study is cumbersome because it requires identifying the students who interrupted studies in higher education centres from the administrative records of all the centres of the same level. Therefore, although there are many empirical studies on dropout, and most of them are quantitative with a positivist bias, with measurement of dropout rates, no studies have determined the disaffiliation rates. In these cases, even when the relevance of conceptual boundaries is recognised, these boundaries are ignored because of operational convenience. This fact corroborates the study by Marcuse (2003): 'Many of the most seriously troublesome concepts are being "eliminated" by showing that no adequate account of them in terms of operations or behaviour can be given' (p. 15). Moreover, 'operational concepts do not even suffice for describing the facts. They only attain certain aspects and segments of facts which, if taken for the whole, deprive the description of its objective, empirical character' (p. 121). For this reason, Marcuse concluded that 'Many, and I think the determining, constitutive facts remain outside the reach of the operational concept' (p. 122).

The other methodological approach involves developing studies based on data from school records and determining the reasons underlying dropout. These data can be obtained using surveys, followed by statistical analysis. However, this approach does not allow reliably identifying the underlying reasons (Acevedo, 2020; Gunuc & Kuzu, 2015), differentiating between dropout and disaffiliation, or determining the duration of the interruption.

These two approaches, especially the first, assume an unbiased perspective typical of *etic* approaches usually adopted by educational sociologists (see Appendix 3).

There is a third option, very rare in the current literature, that although it considers the utility of distant and dispassionate observation—*etic* approaches—also stress the need, relevance, and convenience of rigorous inquiry about the reasons for dropout reported by students. For this purpose, speech production techniques—especially in-depth interviews and discussion groups—are suitable because they most closely resemble an empathic immersion in the scene—*emic* approach—and avoid the illusion of transparency of speeches, which results in the operation of confusing the statement of a speech with the real existence (or the veracity) of the values referred in the speech.

Similarly, it is crucial to consider the source used to determine whether the student decision was dropout or disaffiliation. Considering a primary source—the student’s testimony—the identification of abandonment is not so difficult because it is related to the time in which the student, according to his/her statement, decided to stop attending classes before finishing the courses initiated in the higher education centre in which he/she had enrolled or, in the case of having completed them, at the moment in which he/she decided not to take the exams that would have allowed him/her to receive course credits, or the time in which, having completed the courses and completed the exams, decided not to enrol in other courses. The only difficulty is determining the date of the dropout because the student does not know, or does not want to say.

In contrast, using a secondary source, e.g., data from school records, it is impossible to determine the date of dropout because the information on the time the student decided to stop attending the courses initiated in the centre in which he/she had enrolled, or not to take the exams, or not to enrol in other courses, is not available. In these cases, it can be considered that dropout occurred when the student performed no academic activities (e.g., enrolment in a course or exam) for a specified period (e.g., 1 year). The date of dropout corresponds to the time when the last academic activity (e.g., enrolment in a course or exam) was registered, although it is likely that the decision to abandon studies was made much later.

One of the main consequences of this approach is that dropout rates in a higher education centre calculated using primary sources are different from those determined using secondary sources. In this respect, some students who decided to drop out appear as *active* in school records, whereas other students may consider themselves as still enrolled—that is, they did not abandon studies—but will be excluded from school records or classified as *inactive students* or *deserters* after a certain period without academic activities. Furthermore, official dropout rates are unknown in Uruguay and other Latin-American countries (Acevedo, 2020). In this respect, dropouts are not measured, perhaps because nobody requests it, or school organisations comply with implicit institutional directives not to do so. What is measured, in some cases, is the student persistence and the terminal efficiency, perhaps because they are easier to measure.

The most relevant consequence of this argument is the assumption that disaffiliation is more worrying—for the State, which must guarantee the education of all its citizens by institutional mandate, as well as for the market and education systems, school organisations and, in most cases, students who disengage rather than abandoning a career or a higher education centre (Acevedo, 2014). However, dropouts constitute ‘a high-risk event that involves most of the academic paths that culminate in disaffiliation’ (Fernández, 2010) and is even a significant indicator of risk.

Another assumption relevant to the methodological approach and to the design and implementation of policies is that disaffiliation as a research problem can only be adequately analysed from the institutional perspective—the educational system—and not from the organisational perspective—the higher education centre.

Other conceptual boundaries: retention, persistence, student success

A brief analysis of the specialised literature on the abandonment of studies in higher education reveals that in the last two decades there have been some relevant lexical and semantic 'slides'. Some studies addressed the lexical dimension rather than the semantic dimension, for example promoting the slide from the word *desertion* towards the word *dropout*. Other studies sought conceptual or semantic adaptations by using the word *retention*—when it comes to the school perspective—or the word *persistence*—when it comes to the student perspective—instead of *desertion*, *dropout* or *disaffiliation*.

The focus changed when adopting a perspective based on retention. Retention is the ability of a school institution to ensure that students graduate (Berger, Blanco & Lyons, 2012). The correct expression in this context is "retention of the school institution"; however, for discursive convenience, the phrase "school retention" or "retention" will be used in this text. On this basis, the European Higher Education Area (Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior) considered the retention rate as a relevant indicator of the quality of higher education (Johnston, 2013), whereas the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) considered the dropout rate as one of the leading indicators of university performance (Bricall, 2000; OECD, 2012).

Consequently, retention rates reflect the accountability of higher education centres to funding agencies (Rodríguez Espinar, 2014) because low rates lead to a significant reduction in economic income, which risks the financial stability of centres (Morrison & Silverman, 2012), which in turn can be penalised by the government through cuts in subsidies or funding. Also, for some social sectors, low retention rates evidence the waste of invested money because the expected objectives are not achieved (Torenbeek, Jansen & Hofman, 2010), including the need to have a highly trained workforce at the service of capital in an increasingly competitive market (Morrison & Silverman, 2012; Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 2015; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2012; Seidman, 2012a). This instrumental view of higher education occurs because knowledge and its competencies are perceived as highly valuable and marketable commodities.

From this perspective, based on the dominant neoliberal ideology in most parts of the world and an increasing trend towards the generalisation and internationalisation of higher education, school dropout becomes a cause for concern in local and global economies. That is how since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the retention rate has been highly relevant for ranking universities (Johnston, 2013). Serra Hagedorn (2012) reported that 'The rankings serve as a prestige barometer and create an intense competition, especially among top research universities. To establish the highest rankings, universities can be somewhat creative in who is counted and who is not' (p. 93). For this reason, retention rates become 'a source of prestige that can be converted into other kinds of symbolic, material, and human resources—particularly in the competition for more and better students' (Berger, Blanco & Lyons, 2012, p. 10). In this way, retention policies contribute to the successful completion of studies and provide greater prestige to universities and, consequently, higher economic profitability. This approach promotes the

development and consolidation of a university retention industry, which is considered a promising business (Rodríguez Espinar, 2014).

Moreover, Tinto (2012a) found that *persistence* indicates the rate to which students who began higher education remain enrolled for a given time, regardless of whether they attend the same or another higher education centre. For this reason, the expression *persistence* considers the student's perspective. The indicators of retention and persistence are different because they are related to phenomena associated with different units of analysis, i.e., retention is related to the centre, whereas persistence is related to students. Although the goal of student persistence is graduation, persistence is not the opposite of dropout (Cabrera, Pérez & López, 2014; Tinto, 2012a).

The difference between school retention and persistence is not trivial (Tinto, 2012a) because many students finish studies in higher education centres other than those in which they had initially enrolled. In these cases, there is retention in the educational system but not in the centre in which students initially enrolled. Note that this difference is analogous to that between dropout—abandonment of studies in a higher education centre—and disaffiliation—disengagement from the higher education system.

The words *dropout* and *disaffiliation* were changed to *school retention*—from the school perspective, or *persistence*—from the student's perspective, because of the conviction that the use of the words *dropout* and *disaffiliation* entailed adjudicating to the student the sole responsibility of deciding to abandon studies and its effects—blaming the victim—ignoring the structural factors that might affect that decision (Castaño, Gallón, Gómez & Vásquez, 2008; Díaz, 2007). This theoretical-conceptual framework favoured the use of the expression *student success* (see Appendix 3)

However, in the perspective that predominates in current academic literature, researchers tend to arrogate the power, perhaps inadvertently, to define student success based on their unspoken opinions and not from students' opinions. This socio-centric and adult-centred (and/or academic-centred) position is consistent with attributing to education an instrumental and pragmatic character typical of neoliberalism, which is the hegemonic ideology in the current Western world. This attribution emphasises outcomes, competencies, and performativity, which is in line with the concept of knowledge as a commodity that is sold in the market—which needs to have utility and applicability (Ball, 2004)—and the quality of education is directly associated with quantitative indicators of accountability (Zepke, 2011). These conceptions have detrimental effects and are condensed in a discourse through which a political-economic form of power-knowledge is constructed (Springer, 2018) and operates as a powerful technology of control (Suspitsyna, 2010).

Within the framework of this neoliberal view, in which student engagement is a proxy for student success and educational quality (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), higher education centres seek to make allegedly objective and unbiased measurements to define the educational policies to be implemented and the resources to be applied. In this conception, centres are perceived to be a sort of Taylorist model, in which the *outputs* are compared with the

inputs, and the complexities inherent to the processes—*throughputs*—are ignored. These conceptualisations and the search for accountability promoted the assumption that institutional effectiveness can be measured from school retention and graduation rates, ignoring that these measurements are ‘a dramatic oversimplification of a very complex process’ (Habley, Bloom & Robbins, 2012, p. 340).

Other methodological implications

It is worth highlighting the implications of the distinction between retention and persistence. Perhaps the most critical and obvious implication is that average persistence rates are higher than school retention rates (in the same way that average dropout rates are higher than disaffiliation rates). Similarly, the inadequacy of school records allows measuring retention (and dropout) more accurately than persistence (and disaffiliation).

Another important consequence is that it is challenging to measure persistence accurately because this phenomenon is usually discontinuous: some students temporarily suspend attendance at a higher education centre (stop-out), sometimes for an extended period. After a period that is typically difficult to predict and determine, some students resume academic activities in the same centre—discontinuous institutional retention—or in another centre: discontinuous student persistence (Tinto, 2012a). Another factor is the difficulty to determine whether abandonment is temporary (stop-out) or permanent (dropout).

Furthermore, persistence and dropout are not opposite phenomena (Tinto, 2012a). In this respect, a study conducted in Flanders, Belgium, has shown that the wrong choice of higher education program by students is a critical predictor of not completing studies in that program and that the right choice of the program is not a critical predictor of finishing studies (Pinxten et al., 2015): ‘Knowing why students leave does not tell us—at least not directly—what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed’ (Tinto, 2012b, p. 253). Habley, Bloom and Robbins (2012) reported that although students often attribute their decision to abandon studies to health, personal, and economic problems, the inverse is not necessarily true. That is, ‘just because students are healthy, well adjusted, and can afford to attend, those circumstances do not mean that they will continue to enrol’ (p. 32).

This fact explains why the accurate measurement of dropout, which is temporary by definition, does not allow determining persistence. Similarly, the identification of persistent students at a specific point in time does not indicate that those who at that time do not seem to be persistent have permanently abandoned studies. Therefore, at any given time, it is possible to identify persistent students but not non-persistent students because the latter may resume studies.

Furthermore, for more than a decade, the use of the term *student success* in the context of higher education has increased in the specialised literature, especially in the Anglophone academic community, and may replace the expressions *school retention* and *persistence*. Nonetheless, the term *student success* is being adopted by renowned academic intellectuals,

but not yet by higher education. Only when the centres orientate their institutional policies towards student success, will they be able to provide high-quality academic management, including adequate actions to increase the retention of those students who wish to complete higher education. The mission of higher education centres is not necessarily to ensure student retention but to promote student success—from the students' perspective—as much as possible (Tinto, 2012a; 2017).

Conclusions: The incommensurability of dropout rates

There is broad consensus that in all scientific research, there should be consistency of theoretical approaches and references, and the thorough analysis of domains, variables, indicators, the strength of empirical evidence, and adequacy of the adopted methods to guarantee the coherence and validity of the results (Rodríguez Espinar, 2014). This process starts with the correct conceptualisation and construction of the object of study. In this respect, the object of study—dropout in higher education—is polysemic and highly complex. The dropout rate *per se* does not adequately define the phenomenon because there is not a unique definition of dropout. 'The dropout rate ignores a set of conditions that go beyond calculating the number of students who do not enrol in studies' (Rodríguez Espinar, 2014, p. 50). This fact limits the analysis of dropout rates, and restricts the concept of dropout to contextual interpretations (Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 2015).

This framework ultimately leads to the adoption of the definition of dropout that is most appropriate for theoretical, technical, political, and pragmatic interests of each researcher, higher education centre, and country. More importantly, the definition of dropout that is accepted is often the most easily measurable according to the available data and the existing human, technical, and economic resources. We are thus in a field marked by a sort of incommensurability (see Appendix 3).

The methodological implications of this approach are predictable. The conceptualisations of dropout in higher education established by a researcher usually differ from those established by another researcher, even if both terms refer to the same abstract concept: dropout. Moreover, methods adopted in different scientific communities are not sufficiently unified, standardised, or jointly accepted. For this reason, measurements are different between studies, and the types of data generated and analysed are different, which prevents 'interpreting data unequivocally between and within countries, especially when different sources are used' (Rodríguez Espinar, 2014, p. 50).

Finally, the measurement of dropout (or school retention) is complex, context-dependent (Serra Hagedorn, 2012), and requires thorough knowledge of the variables to be measured and access to accurate institutional data collected systematically (Gairín et al., 2014). In addition to the fact that official data are usually incomplete and not externally validated, the regulatory bodies and institutional *habitus* (Thomas, 2002) of the entities that regulate higher education usually make access to data with these attributes—if they exist—difficult or unfeasible. The cost of information management systems run by universities also limits

the public availability of data on indicators of dropout and retention (Rodríguez Espinar, 2014). In fact, 'The implementation of a model is determined by technical elements: variables and their measurement, sample representativeness, strategies adopted to obtain evidence, and analytical techniques' (Rodríguez Espinar, 2014, p. 64).

In conclusion, the researcher faces at least four barriers that hinder the proper methodological analysis of dropout and persistence in higher education as objects of study:

1. Absence of precise and sufficiently consensual definition of dropout and persistence in higher education.
2. Measurement difficulties, which make researchers choose the definition that is most easily measurable based on the available data, individual research interests, and the current methodological strategies, rather than adopting a definition of dropout (or persistence) that is more theoretically and conceptually consistent.
3. Access to school data may be limited, absent, or unreliable.
4. The nature of the data and the absence of a unique definition of dropout and persistence in higher education at the national and international levels limit generalising this concept and/or comparing with data from other organisations.

To overcome these difficulties, in the earlier research discussed in this article's Introduction section, we used a definition of dropout with the highest possible degree of theoretical and conceptual consistency and adequacy to the specificities of the evaluated higher education centres and their social and academic contexts. Data were obtained from centres. The limited coverage and reliability of these data were overcome using a methodological strategy that included producing primary data through direct consultation with qualified informants and using census data, in-depth interviews, and discussion groups. Owing to reasons that will not be discussed here because of space limitations, these last two techniques provided the most reliable and relevant information, opinions, and interpretations. It should be pointed out that the reliability and significance of the discourses obtained using these two techniques can be more fully appreciated by considering the argument made by Tinto (2012b) to clarify his theory on the vital role of student's social and academic integration in persistence: 'For researchers, what matters are not the abstractions we use such as academic or social integration, but how we define and in turn measure the behaviours from which abstractions are drawn and the meanings different people derive from those interactions' (p. 253).

However, the explanatory factors of dropout in the higher education centres of Rivera do not allow generalising or extrapolating the results to other territorial, social, and institutional contexts. Similarly, other results, especially the dropout rates measured in higher education, cannot be compared with those obtained in different territories and educational institutions.

Acknowledgment

This article is based on the author's doctoral thesis *Análisis de la persistencia estudiantil en el primer año de la educación superior en un contexto socio-académico desfavorable. El caso de Rivera, Uruguay* [Analysis of student persistence in the first year of higher education in an unfavourable socio-academic context. The case of Rivera, Uruguay], co-supervised by Dr Jaume Sarramona and Dr José María Ariso. It was successfully defended at the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (España) on 28 September 2018 (approved with distinction, *cum laude*).
<https://reunir.unir.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/9475/TESIS%20F%20ACEVEDO%2013abril2018.pdf>

The research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Acevedo, F. (2014). La desafiliación en un centro de formación docente. Un análisis provisional. [School disengagement in a teacher training centre. A provisional analysis]. In T. Fernández & Á. Ríos (Eds.), *El tránsito entre ciclos en la Educación Media y Superior de Uruguay* (pp. 183-208). Montevideo: Universidad de la República.
<https://www.colibri.udelar.edu.uy/jspui/bitstream/20.500.12008/20236/1/EI%20tr%C3%A1nsito%20entre%20ciclos%20en%20la%20Educaci%C3%B3n%20Media%20y%20Superior%20de%20Uruguay.pdf>
- Acevedo, F. (2020). Factores explicativos del abandono de los estudios en la educación superior en contextos socio-académicos desfavorables [Explanatory factors for dropout from higher education in unfavourable socio-academic contexts]. *Revista Española de Pedagogía*, 78(276), 195-212. <https://doi.org/10.22550/REP78-2-2020-02>
- Ball, S. J. (2004). Performativities and fabrications in the educational economy: towards the perfect society. In S. J. Ball (Ed.), *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in sociology of education* (pp. 143-155). London: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/The-RoutledgeFalmer-Reader-in-Sociology-of-Education/Ball/p/book/9780415327763>
- Berger, J. B., Blanco, G. B. & Lyons, S. (2012). Past to present: A historical look at retention. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 7-34). Plymouth, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442212527/College-Student-Retention-Formula-for-Student-Success-2nd-Edition>
- Bricall, J. (Ed). (2000). *Informe Universidad 2000. Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos [University 2000 Report. Organization of Ibero-American States]*.
https://www.observatoriuniversitari.org/es/files/2014/05/Bricall_JM-2000-Informe-Universidad-2000.pdf
- Cabrera, A., Pérez, P. & López, L. (2014). Evolución de perspectivas en el estudio de la retención universitaria en los EE.UU.: bases conceptuales y puntos de inflexión [Evolution of perspectives in the analysis of university retention in the United States: Conceptual bases and points of inflection]. In P. Figuera (Ed.), *Persistir con éxito en la universidad: de la investigación a la acción* (pp. 15-40). Barcelona: Laertes.

- <https://www.ub.edu/trals/publicaciones/libros/persistir-con-exito-en-la-universidad-de-la-investigacion-a-la-accion/>
- Carroll, L. (1871). *Through the looking-glass*. New York, NY: Books of Wonder.
<https://maggiecmneill.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/through-the-looking-glass.pdf>
- Castaño, E., Gallón, S., Gómez, K. & Vásquez, J. (2008). Análisis de los factores asociados a la deserción estudiantil en la Educación Superior: un estudio de caso [Analysis of the factors associated with student dropout in higher education: A case study]. *Revista de Educación*, 345, 255-280.
<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=2506107>
- Díaz, M. D. M. (2007). Efetividade no Ensino Superior Brasileiro: Aplicação de Modelos Multinível À Análise dos Resultados do Exame Nacional de Cursos [Effectiveness of higher education in Brazil: Application of multilevel models to the analysis of results of the National Assessment of Courses]. *Revista Económica*, 8(1), 93-120.
http://www.anpec.org.br/revista/vol8/vol8n1p93_120.pdf
- Fernández, T. (Ed.). (2010). *La desafiliación en la educación media y superior de Uruguay: Conceptos, estudios, políticas* [School disengagement in middle and higher education in Uruguay: Concepts, studies, policies]. Montevideo: Universidad de la República.
<https://www.colibri.udelar.edu.uy/jspui/bitstream/20.500.12008/9620/1/La%20desafiliacion%20en%20la%20educacion%20media%20y%20superior.pdf>
- Feyerabend, P. K. (1981). Explanation, reduction, and empiricism. In *Realism, rationalism and scientific method: Philosophical papers* (pp. 44-96). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139171526.005>
- Foucault, M. (2005) [1966]. *Las palabras y las cosas. Una arqueología de las ciencias humanas* [The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences]. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI.
<https://www.traficantes.net/libros/las-palabras-y-las-cosas>
- Gairín, J., Triado, X. M., Feixas, M., Figuera, P., Aparicio-Chueca, P. & Torrado, M. (2014). Student dropout rates in Catalan universities: Profile and motives for disengagement. *Quality in Higher Education*, 20(2), 165-182.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2014.925230>
- Gunuc, S. & Kuzu, A. (2015). Student engagement scale: Development, reliability and validity. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(4), 587-610.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.938019>
- Habley, W. R., Bloom, J. L. & Robbins, S. (2012). *Increasing persistence: Research-based strategies for college student success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Increasing+Persistence%3A+Research+based+Strategies+for+College+Student+Success-p-9780470888438>
- Harris, M. (1968). *The rise of anthropological theory: A history of theories of culture*. New York: Crowell. <https://es.scribd.com/doc/291917919/Marvin-Harris-The-Rise-of-Anthropological-Theory-A-History-of-Theories-of-Culture-Thomas-Y-Cromwell-Company-1971-pdf>
- Holliman, A. J., Martin, A. J. & Collie, R. J. (2018). Adaptability, engagement, and degree completion: A longitudinal investigation of university students. *Educational Psychology*, 38(6), 785-799. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2018.1426835>
- Johnston, B. (2013). *El primer año de universidad. Una experiencia positiva de transición* [The first year of university. A positive experience of transition]. Madrid: Narcea.

- Kahu, E. R. & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H. & Whitt, E. J. (2010). *Student success in College: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Student+Success+in+College%3A+Creating+Conditions+That+Matter%2C+%28Includes+New+Preface+and+Epilogue%29-p-9780470599099>
- Lazarsfeld, P. (1985). De los conceptos a los índices empíricos [From concepts to empirical indexes]. In R. Boudon & P. Lazarsfeld, *Metodología de las ciencias sociales, 1. Conceptos e índices* (pp. 99-109) [*Methodologies in social sciences, 1. Concepts and indexes*]. Barcelona: Laia.
- Longden, B. (2001). Off course - renewed interest in retention but whose interest is being served? Paper presented at the Higher Education Close Up Conference 2, Lancaster University, 16-18 July. [not found 15 Aug 2021] <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001766.htm>
- Marcuse, H. (2003). *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. London: Routledge & Kegan. <https://www.routledge.com/One-Dimensional-Man-Studies-in-the-Ideology-of-Advanced-Industrial-Society/Marcuse/p/book/9780415289771>
- Morrison, L. & Silverman, L. (2012). Retention theories, models, and concepts. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 61-80). Plymouth, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442212527/College-Student-Retention-Formula-for-Student-Success-2nd-Edition>
- Munizaga, F. R., Cifuentes, M. B. & Beltrán, A. J. (2017). Variables y factores asociados al fenómeno de la retención y abandono estudiantil universitario en investigaciones de Latinoamérica y el Caribe [Variables and factors related to school retention and university dropout in Latin-American and Caribbean researches]. Paper presented at the *Séptima Conferencia Latinoamericana sobre el Abandono en la Educación Superior (VII CLABES)* [*Seventh Latinoamerican Conference in Dropout in Higher Education*], Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (Argentina), 15-17 November. <https://revistas.utp.ac.pa/index.php/clabes/article/view/1671>
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2012). *Education at a glance*. OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/education/highlights.pdf>
- Pinxten, M., De Fraine, B., Van Den Noortgate, W., Van Damme, J., Boonen, T. & Vanlaar, G. (2015). 'I choose so I am': A logistic analysis of major selection in university and successful completion of the first year. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(10), 1919-1946. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.914904>
- Rodríguez Espinar, S. (2014). La problemática en la determinación de buenas prácticas en la transición a los estudios universitarios [The problem in determining good practices in the transition to university studies]. In P. Figuera (Ed.), *Persistir con éxito en la universidad: de la investigación a la acción* (pp. 41-94). Barcelona: Laertes. <https://www.ub.edu/trals/publicaciones/libros/persistir-con-exito-en-la-universidad-de-la-investigacion-a-la-accion/>

- Rodríguez-Gómez, D., Feixas, M., Gairín, J. & Muñoz, J. L. (2015). Understanding Catalan university dropout from a cross-national approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(4), 690-703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842966>
- Schuh, J. & Gansemer-Topf, A. (2012). Finances and retention: Trends and potential implications. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 1-5). Plymouth, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442212527/College-Student-Retention-Formula-for-Student-Success-2nd-Edition>
- Scimago (2018). *Journal rankings on education*.
<https://www.scimagojr.com/journalrank.php?category=3304>
- Seidman, A. (2012a). Introduction. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 1-5). Plymouth, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442212527/College-Student-Retention-Formula-for-Student-Success-2nd-Edition>
- Seidman, A. (2012b). Taking action: A retention formula and model for student success. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 267-284). Plymouth, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442212527/College-Student-Retention-Formula-for-Student-Success-2nd-Edition>
- Serra Hagedorn, L. (2012). How to define retention: A new look at an old problem. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 81-99). Plymouth, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442212527/College-Student-Retention-Formula-for-Student-Success-2nd-Edition>
- Springer, S. (2018). No more room in hell: Neoliberalism as living dead. In D. Cahill, M. Cooper, M. Konings & D. Primrose (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of neoliberalism* (pp. 620-630). <https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/ocw/the-sage-handbook-of-neoliberalism/book245419#contents> [also https://www.academia.edu/38700095/No_More_Room_in_Hell_Neoliberalism_as_Living_Dead]
- Suspitsyna, T. (2010). Accountability in American education as a rhetoric and a technology of governmentality. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(5), 567-586.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930903548411>
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423-442.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930210140257>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/L/bo3630345.html>
- Tinto, V. (2012a). *Completing college: Rethinking institutional action*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo5514387.html>

- Tinto, V. (2012b). Moving from theory to action. A model of institutional action for student success. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 251-266). Plymouth, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442212527/College-Student-Retention-Formula-for-Student-Success-2nd-Edition>
- Tinto, V. (2017). Reflections on student persistence. *Student Success*, 8(2), 1-8.
<https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.376>
- Torenbeek, M., Jansen, E. & Hofman, A. (2010). The effect of the fit between secondary and university education on first-year student achievement. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(6), 659-675. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903222625>
- Webb, O. J. & Cotton, D. R. E. (2018). Early withdrawal from higher education: A focus on academic experiences. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(7), 835-852.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1437130>
- Zepke, N. (2011). Understanding teaching, motivation and external influences in student engagement: How can complexity thinking help? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 16(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2011.549721>

Appendix 1

The 48 journals Q1 mentioned are the following; the position that each of them occupies in the ranking of Scimago (2018) is included in parentheses:

Review of Educational Research (#1)	Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice (#79)
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis (#2)	Review of Research in Education (#80)
Sociology of Education (#3)	Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics (#81)
Educational Researcher (#4)	Higher Education Research and Development (#94)
Education Finance and Policy (#6),	Comparative Education Review (#101)
American Educational Research Journal (#8)	Journal of Educational Administration (#103)
Journal of Education Policy (#15)	Oxford Review of Education (#115)
Educational Research Review (#16)	Quality in Higher Education (#124)
Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness (#21)	Equity & Excellence in Education (#128)
Harvard Educational Review (#25)	British Educational Research Journal (#129)
Critical Studies in Education (#27)	British Journal of Educational Studies (#154)
Economics of Education Review (#32)	Journal of Educational Measurement (#168)
Studies in Science Education (#38)	Cambridge Journal of Education (#169)
Journal of Higher Education (#40)	Theory and Research in Social Education (#182)
Research in Higher Education (#43)	Higher Education Quarterly (#194)
Studies in Higher Education (#47)	Educational Research (#198)
Educational Policy (#56)	Australian Journal of Education (#213)
Higher Education (#57)	Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management (#220)
Journal of Studies in International Education (#62)	International Journal of Educational Development (#229)
Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice (#63)	
American Journal of Education (#65)	

Review of Higher Education (#66)	Survey Research Methods (#230)
Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education (#69)	International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (#236)
School Effectiveness and School Improvement (#72)	Journal of College Student Development (#241)
British Journal of Sociology of Education (#75)	European Educational Research Journal (#248)

Appendix 2

The 19 journals mentioned are the following. As in the previous case, the position that each of them occupies in the ranking of Scimago (2018) is included in parentheses:

Revista de Investigación Educativa (Q1, #160)	Perfiles Educativos (Q3, #563)
Comunicar (Q1, #193)	Aula Abierta (Q3, #595)
Educación XX1 (Q2, #318)	Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa (Q3, #716)
Estudios Sobre Educación (Q2, #323)	Revista Española de Pedagogía (Q3, #777)
Revista Complutense de Educación (Q2, #354)	Magis (Q4, #839), Revista de la Educación Superior (Q4, #848)
Revista Electrónica de Investigación y Evaluación Educativa (Q2, #361)	Revista Iberoamericana de Educación Superior (Q4, #856)
Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa (Q2, #463)	Revista Electrónica Educare (Q4, #1080)
Formación Universitaria (Q2, #519)	Publicaciones de la Facultad de Educación y Humanidades del Campus de Melilla (Q4, #1194)
Bordon (Q3, #542)	
Revista de Educación (Q3, #557)	

Appendix 3

Etic approaches

Etic approaches describe cultural facts in terms of the conceptual framework and categories of the scientist — the observer's perspective — while *emic* approaches describe them from the point of view of its bearers — the participant's perspective — (Harris, 1968).

The slide from dropout towards student success

The lexical and semantical 'slides' from dropout and retention towards persistence, and from persistence towards student success, is also present in the changes over time in the titles of the publications considered references in this field. The most notable case is that of Vincent Tinto. His first two high-impact books were titled '*Dropout* from higher education' (Tinto, 1975) and '*Leaving* college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition' (Tinto, 1987), while his last book was titled '*Completing* college: Rethinking institutional action' (Tinto, 2012a) and the title of one of his last studies is 'Moving from theory to action: A model of institutional action for *student success*' (Tinto, 2012b), described in the influential book '*College student retention: Formula for student success*' (Seidman, 2012). Two other relevant books that address these 'slides' are '*Increasing persistence: Research-based strategies for college student success*' (Habley, Bloom & Robbins,

2012) and ‘*Student success in college*’ (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2010) (this author's italicising in titles).

Observational incommensurability

In this work the concept of observational incommensurability is evaluated according to the meaning attributed by Feyerabend (1981) to observational terms: ‘The meaning of a term is not an intrinsic property of it but is dependent upon the way in which the term has been incorporated into a theory’ (p. 68). Observational incommensurability occurs when an object — given a single signifier — is analysed by two subjects, and each subject attributes a different meaning, and the absence of mutual intelligibility limits the joint analysis of both meanings. In these cases, the two subjects have to measure two different objects, although their corresponding signifiers are phonetically identical.

Dr Fernando Acevedo (corresponding author) holds a PhD (summa cum laude) from the International University of La Rioja, Spain. Dr Acevedo is currently a full-time professor and Academic Head of the Centro de Estudios sobre Políticas Educativas, Universidad de la República, Uruguay [Centre for Educational Policy Studies, University of the Republic, Uruguay]. His research focuses on policy studies with an emphasis on critical approaches to how higher education centres provide quality education and promote student success.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0815-7980>

Email: face@cur.edu.uy

Please cite as: Acevedo, F. (2021). Concepts and measurement of dropout in higher education: A critical perspective from Latin America. *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(3), 661-678. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/acevedo.pdf>