

Dropout intention in Portuguese higher education: A descriptive analysis of students' academic and social conditions

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Abstract

This paper explores dropout intention among students in Portuguese higher education, adopting a descriptive approach. Using data from a national survey conducted between 2023 and 2024 (N = 260), this study explores how academic, socioeconomic, and institutional conditions are associated with students' consideration of dropping out. The findings show that a substantial proportion of students have contemplated dropping out despite remaining formally enrolled, bringing to the front the relevance of disengagement as a latent process. Socioeconomic disadvantage, institutional context and perceived academic pressures emerge as factors of vulnerability. The paper helps to discuss retention and dropout intentions foregrounding descriptive patterns that inform preventive and context-sensitive support strategies.

Keywords: higher education; dropout intention; Portugal; dropout factors

1. Introduction

Portuguese higher education has been expanding steadily in recent decades, integrating a greater diversity of student profiles made possible by widening access to more socially heterogeneous groups (Farias et al., 2024; Lobo, 2023). Despite these advances, inequalities in progression and completion of academic pathways remain problematic. Students from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, first-generation students, and those enrolled in less selective institutions or courses continue to be more vulnerable to discontinuous academic trajectories and dropout (Tavares et al., 2022; Bernardo et al. 2025). These inequalities are typically analysed primarily through formal dropout indicators. However, these indicators may hide less visible forms of disengagement that precede the actual dropout from the system. The classical literature has emphasised that dropout should be understood as a gradual process in which the academic and social ties between the student and the institution weaken over time (Tinto, 2012).

In this process, although students may remain formally enrolled, they may also experience a loss of motivation, a weakening of their sense of belonging, or growing doubts about continuing their studies. The intention to drop out emerges, in this context, as a particularly relevant indicator. According to Bean (1980), intentions precede the final decision and reflect subjective assessments of the academic experience, expectations, and perceived costs of staying. Engagement includes affective, cognitive and relational dimensions that are not fully captured by performance indicators (Kuh, 2009; Thomas, 2012). When these dimensions deteriorate, a state of vulnerability sets in, marked more by ambivalence than by an immediate decision to leave.

The notion of belonging and recognition has taken centre stage in this debate. Research suggests that institutional recognition, the quality of pedagogical interactions, and the perception of support contribute decisively to student retention (Honneth, 1995; Harper & Quaye, 2009). In contrast, institutional contexts perceived as distant, unresponsive or overly bureaucratic can favour processes of progressive withdrawal. These dynamics are similar to approaches to academic burnout and psychological disengagement, which identify emotional exhaustion and loss of meaning as stages preceding more profound disruptions in academic careers (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Schaufeli et al., 2002). The COVID-19 pandemic has made these weaknesses more visible. Although not creating them from scratch, the period of emergency remote teaching has intensified financial constraints, social isolation and uncertainty, exposing latent forms of disengagement in higher education (Aristovnik et al., 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2021). In Portugal, recent studies highlight the emotional impact and perception of institutional fragility experienced by students during and after the pandemic, reinforcing the need to analyse the concrete conditions of study beyond formal indicators of success (Flores et al., 2024). It is in this context that the present study stands. Taking a quantitative and descriptive approach, the paper aims to map students' intention to drop out of Portuguese higher education, exploring its distribution across academic, socioeconomic, and institutional conditions, as well as students' subjective perceptions. Thus, the research question guiding the study is as follows: What descriptive patterns can be identified in the academic, social and institutional conditions of students associated with the intention to drop out of Portuguese higher education?

2. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, descriptive approach. It draws on data from a national survey conducted as part of a broader research project examining student success, academic experiences, and the factors influencing dropout in Portuguese higher education.

2.1. Participants and data collection procedures

The sample comprises 260 students enrolled in Portuguese higher education. Data were collected between 2023 and 2024 through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms and disseminated through institutional channels and researchers' networks. The survey targeted higher education students in Portugal whose studies covered several years, including the pandemic period. Following data collection, responses were exported to Excel and cleaned to remove incomplete or inconsistent entries, yielding a final analytical sample of 260 valid responses. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents represent both universities and polytechnics, mostly from the public sector, and come from a wide range of disciplinary areas and study levels [179 students from bachelor's (69%) and 81 students from master's degrees (31%)]. This diversity covers a broad picture of student trajectories and living conditions within the system. The sample is not statistically representative of the Portuguese higher education student population, given the non-probabilistic sampling strategy and the absence of proportional allocation across institutions, study programmes or academic years. For these reasons, the findings cannot be generalised to the entire population. Nevertheless, it partially reflects the structure of the system, particularly in the predominance of students from public institutions, which mirrors the national distribution of enrolments (Tavares et al. 2024). The higher proportion of university students also corresponds, although imperfectly, to broader system trends. The choice of a purely descriptive approach reflects the exploratory nature of the study and the constraints of the non-probabilistic sample, which limit the interpretive value of inferential statistics. Findings should therefore be read as indicative patterns rather than statistical associations. The questionnaire comprised four main thematic blocks, informed by established literature on student dropout, academic integration, and educational inequalities (Tinto, 2012; Bean, 1980; Thomas, 2012; Kuh, 2009; Honneth, 1995). The present article focuses specifically on the descriptive analysis of students' socio-economic backgrounds, institutional contexts, and self-reported perceptions associated with dropout intention. The purpose of the analysis is to identify patterns, rather than to estimate causal relations or conduct inferential testing. The choice of descriptive analysis aligns with the exploratory nature of the study and with arguments in the literature that emphasise the importance of mapping early signs of disengagement before formal dropout occurs (Yorke, 2000; Harper and Quayle, 2009). The study complied with fundamental ethical principles for research in education and the social sciences. Participants provided informed consent, data were fully anonymised, and all procedures complied with the General Data Protection Regulation.

2.2. Sample characterisation

Table 1 summarises the most relevant sociodemographic and institutional characteristics of the participants. The sample is predominantly composed of young students, with a mean age of 24.2 years ($SD = 7.5$). Females are clearly overrepresented, accounting for 71% of respondents,

while international students constitute only a small fraction of the sample (4%). Most participants are enrolled in universities (82%) and attend public institutions (87%). From a socioeconomic perspective, household monthly income is mainly concentrated in the intermediate levels, particularly €761–1520 (38%) and €1521–2000 (26%). Regarding parental educational background, secondary education is the most common level for both fathers (37%) and mothers (40%), although a substantial share of students report having parents with higher education (around 30–33%).

Table 1. Sample characterisation

Variable	Category	N	%
Age (Mean $\pm$ SD)	—	24.2 $\pm$ 7.5	
Gender	Female	184	71%
	Male	75	29%
	Other	1	0%
International student	No	249	96%
	Yes	11	4%
Type of institution	University	214	82%
	Polytechnic	46	18%
Institutional sector	Public	227	87%
	Private	33	13%
Household monthly income	up to €760	46	18%
	€761–1520	98	38%
	€1521–2000	67	26%
	€2001–4000	32	12%
	above €4000	17	7%
Parental education (highest)	Higher education	124	48%
	Secondary education	104	40%
	Basic education	32	12%

Note: Age is reported as mean $\pm$ standard deviation. Frequencies are shown for categorical variables.

3. Findings

This section presents the descriptive results of the survey, organised around four domains: (i) prevalence of dropout intention, (ii) socioeconomic inequalities, (iii) institutional context and belonging, and (iv) motivational factors influencing students' decisions to continue or drop out. All statistics reflect the values contained in the validated dataset.

3.1 Prevalence of dropout intention

As shown in Table 2, approximately one-third of students (33.5%) reported having considered dropping out of higher education at least once, while 66.5% had never considered it. Given that all respondents were still formally enrolled at the time of data collection, this finding suggests that the risks of dropping out are high. This result aligns with the argument that disengagement

precedes formal departure and may go undetected by administrative indicators of enrolment or completion in institutional monitoring systems.

Table 2. Prevalence of dropout intention

Category	N	%
Considered dropping out	87	33.5
Never considered	173	66.5

Rather than reflecting imminent dropout, these intentions reflect a condition of academic vulnerability marked by continued enrolment but growing ambivalence and disengagement, reinforcing the view of dropout as a gradual process rather than a discrete event.

3.2 Socioeconomic inequalities

Clear socioeconomic gradients emerge regarding dropout intention. As reported in Table 3, students from households with lower monthly incomes display systematically higher rates of having considered dropping out. Among students from families earning up to €760 per month, 43.3% reported dropout intentions, compared with 26.7% among those in families in the above €4000 income class. This monotonic decline across income categories suggests that material constraints remain closely associated with students' academic vulnerability.

Table 3. Dropout intention by household monthly income

Income level (Euros)	N	% "Yes"
Up to 760	30	43.3
761-1520	83	36.1
1521-2000	57	29.8
2001-4000	38	21.1
Above 4000	15	26.7

Note: Income data were available for 223 respondents; %ages are calculated within each income category.

A similar pattern is observed for parental education background (Table 4). Students whose parents did not attain higher education, whether limited to basic or secondary schooling, exhibited substantially higher dropout intentions (39.7%) than those with at least one parent holding a higher education degree (26.6%).

Table 4. Dropout intention by parental Education (highest level)

Parental education level (highest)	N	% “Yes”
Basic education	68	39.7
Secondary education (no HE)	68	39.7
Higher Education	124	26.6

These findings are consistent with well-established evidence in the literature: socioeconomic background continues to influence academic trajectories well beyond initial access to higher education.

3.3 Institutional context

Dropout intention also varies across institutional contexts (Table 5). Students enrolled in polytechnic institutions reported higher dropout intentions (41.7%) than those in universities (30.3%). Similarly, students in private institutions were more likely to have considered leaving (45.5%) than those in public institutions (30.8%).

Table 5. Dropout intention by institutional type and nature

Category	N	% “Yes”
University	214	30.3
Polytechnic	46	41.7
Public	227	30.8
Private	33	45.5

These descriptive differences point to institutional asymmetries in students’ experiences of higher education.

3.4 Motivational and perception-based factors

Students who had considered dropping out (N = 87) more frequently reported a combination of academic, economic, and personal pressures when compared to their peers who had never contemplated leaving higher education. Percentages refer to this subgroup, and multiple responses were allowed. Academic overload or difficulties in balancing study and employment emerged as the most prominent factors, cited by 47% of respondents. These were followed by financial constraints (39%) and perceived lack of motivation or dissatisfaction with the chosen programme (35%). Personal or health-related issues were mentioned by 18% of respondents, while negative perceptions of the institutional environment were reported by 16%.

In contrast, students’ persistence appears to be sustained by a set of counterbalancing factors. Family support was identified as the most relevant factor by 73% of students, alongside interest

in the field of study or vocational motivation (52%) and the perceived value of the degree for future employability (46%). Taken together, these findings highlight a dynamic tension between pressures that push students out and resources that pull them back in. They also reinforce the central role of recognition, encouragement and meaningful academic experiences in sustaining students' attachment to higher education, in line with the literature on engagement and belonging.

4. Conclusion

This descriptive study sought to list some situations of vulnerability in Portuguese higher education, focusing on the intention to drop out rather than on actual dropout. We see that a significant proportion of students remain formally enrolled but are already living in a state of uncertainty and vulnerability, often invisible to institutional monitoring mechanisms. However, it is important to consider the timing of data collection and the potential influence of the COVID-19 period on students' responses. Although the pandemic did not create the structural inequalities identified in this study, it likely intensified existing ones. As such, the intention to drop out captured in this study should be interpreted not solely as an individual disposition, but also as a reflection of an exceptional context that may have amplified latent vulnerabilities. Even though the results confirm previous studies, showing that socioeconomic inequalities continue to exert influence far beyond the moment of access the findings of this study further suggest that such inequalities operate through students' everyday academic experiences and living conditions. Financial difficulties, lower family educational capital, and the need to balance study and work emerge as structural pressures that shape students' engagement with higher education. This evidence reinforces the argument that retention policies cannot be limited to pedagogical or academic responses alone. Rather, they must integrate broader approaches that take into account students' living conditions and their effective ability to remain in the system. The differences observed between institutional contexts also raise important questions. The higher levels of intention to drop out in polytechnics and private institutions point to asymmetries that may be related to the fact that these institutions enrol students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Tavares and Cardoso, 2013; Tavares et al., 2024). Although the study does not allow causal inferences, the descriptive patterns suggest that organisational factors, institutional cultures, and available resources may influence the student experience in different ways. Institutional policies should therefore be sensitive to context, avoiding uniform solutions for heterogeneous realities. However, this study has limitations. The analysis remains descriptive and does not include inferential testing. Future work should complement these patterns with chi-square tests, correlation analyses, and regression models to assess the statistical robustness of the associations identified here. A non-representative sample and reliance on self-reported data, which constrain generalisation and the interpretation of disengagement trajectories; nevertheless, it underlines the analytical value of dropout intention

as an early indicator of vulnerability and points to the need for longitudinal and mixed-method research to better understand and prevent disengagement.

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