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## Review of some studies on university student dropout in Colombia and Latin America

### Revisión de algunos estudios sobre la deserción estudiantil universitaria en Colombia y Latinoamérica

Luceli Patiño de Peña\*, Angélica María Cardona Pérez\*

#### ABSTRACT

A study was developed from the research paper *Study of academic mortality, pedagogical strategies, and dropout* on dropout levels in Colombia and Latin America in order to identify factors that in some way affect increased dropout, such as admissions exams, vocational guidance, economics, and personal difficulties. We also identified the elements of greatest convergence: causes of dropping out, economic difficulties, students' personal and family histories, secondary education, and, to a lesser degree, suggested strategies that can be used by universities. Therefore, we can conclude that despite the great diversity of studies, the shortcoming lies in the lack of effective policies curtailing university dropout and lack of support for regional education policies to integrate university, society and State.

#### RESUMEN

En el marco del *Estudio de la mortalidad académica, estrategias pedagógicas y deserción*, se desarrolló una investigación sobre niveles de deserción en Colombia y Latinoamérica para identificar los factores que inciden. Se encuentra que los exámenes de ingreso, la orientación vocacional, la economía y los problemas personales presentan mayor relevancia. Así, se identifican elementos de mayor convergencia, como causas de deserción, dificultades económicas, historia personal y familiar de los estudiantes, educación media y estrategias que puedan ser usadas por universidades. Se concluye que, aunque existe interés y diversidad en los estudios encontrados, la falencia yace en la ausencia de políticas efectivas que frenen la deserción y en la falta de apoyo a las políticas educativas regionales para integrar a la universidad, la sociedad y el Estado.

#### INTRODUCTION

Student dropout is a complex phenomenon with multiple negative impacts both for students and universities, and for the region and society. Studies suggest different dropout levels that affect and are affected by formative models, financial costs and type of program, biographical conditions, and the student's social environment, along with the value of education and educational credentials. Universities respond to the phenomenon as institutions, however, the phenomenon transcends the institution and has become a problem for the education system that requires articulated policies to maintain systematic strategies in order to address student dropout rates.

Universities have approached this situation through the creation of credit arrangements and agreements with banking institutions. Nevertheless, academic dropout rates persist, given that multiple factors influence university dropouts, some of which are related to the student's profile: prior high school experience; social factors (the need to work; combining studies with work); difficulties associated with a lack of prior knowledge

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#### Keywords:

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#### Palabras clave :

Deserción; políticas educativas; factores determinantes; puntos convergentes.

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of the university environment; and little transparency in courses. "Other factors linked to the difficulty in transitioning from high school to university include changes in learning styles, requirement levels, and level of student responsibility, making it difficult to identify weighting factors that influence dropout" (Vivas, 2005).

Studies indicate that factors motivating students to drop out of university vary from economic to academic, which demonstrates that dropping out has become a social problem, and in order to address it, policies and strategies are being formulated to promote the reduction of this phenomenon in universities. The aim is to perceive dropping out as a problem that has a negative impact at individual, institutional, local, regional, national, and international levels.

#### Some international and national studies on dropout rates

Within the international context, much importance has been given to individual aspects concerning student satisfaction levels, course expectations, perceptions of institutional support in academic performance, cultural adaptation, social skills, participation in extracurricular activities, and general skills, among others. A sample of this interest is the study conducted by Oswald, Schmitt, Kim, Ramsay & Gillespie (2004), in which they made an inventory to establish a student bio-data profile that includes three dimensions: intellectual behavior (knowledge, learning, artistic appreciation, etc.); interpersonal behavior (multicultural tolerance, cultural adaptation, leadership, citizenship, social skills, etc.); and intrapersonal behavior (physical and psychological health, adaptability, ethics, vocational orientation, etc.).

On studying this phenomenon, dropout is definitely much lower in countries with more selective higher education admissions systems than in countries with more open systems.

This is due to one of the main problems faced by Institutions of Higher Education (IHE): admissions tests. While some of these universities are interested in student quality, others, on the contrary, pay greater attention to student numbers (Ramírez & Corvo, 2007).

This is why Spain is undertaking an institutional reform process, forcing it to contemplate the reevaluation of its education system and to consider the phenomena that demand much attention, which include dropping out, as part of new social needs. Hence, Ca-

brera, Tomás, Álvarez & González (2006) established that students abandon their studies or change course due to factors relating to their psychological profile, as well as their personal and family histories.

The changes seen in Spain in educational matters have influenced its development, but student dropout persists as one of the main concerns of European educational institutions. This phenomenon is concealed with increased admissions of students to universities, which turns out to be contradictory in that admission does not diminish the dropout risk, but rather increases the possibility of more students abandoning their studies and delaying completion of their professional degree, which affords them access to employment that improves their quality of life while contributing to community development (Bolívar & López, 2009).

Research was also conducted at the Universidad de Costa Rica to identify the reasons why students drop out of university. A number of in-depth interviews were conducted with students, along with a validated questionnaire and interviews with experts (faculty and administrative staff). Armed with all this information, Abarca and Sánchez reached the following conclusions: "not studying their chosen course provokes their decision to drop out; economics is not a determining factor for dropping out and students abandon the institution, but not the university system, since they are incorporated into other options" (2005).

In Colombia, the situation is somewhat discouraging because certain elements are fundamental in increasing dropout rates, such as the financial crisis, vocational guidance, and the early age at which students are entering university. Moreover, studies are not the most satisfactory way of suggesting strategies to deal with said problem (Rojas & González, 2008).

A study conducted in 2010 by the Colombian National Ministry of Education (MEN for its acronym in Spanish) refers to the work carried out during the last five years on school inclusion to put a stop to dropping out. It also proposes increasing credit lines like those granted by ICETEX, improving infrastructure and technological resources, and promoting scientific research, all with the purpose of motivating students to remain at university (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2010).

According to the study conducted in Colombia by the Alumni Observatory at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, it is suggested that:

dropping out of university is a complex issue, given that multiple factors come into play, some of which have to do with student profile: previous experiences of secondary education; social factors; unawareness of the university environment; little transparency in courses (Vivas, 2005).

As well as others factors linked to going from high school to university: changes in learning styles; level of requirements; and student responsibility.

At Universidad de Ibagué in Colombia, dropping out was defined as “the dissolution of the link stipulated through academic enrollment by any cause, by the student, or by the university with serious effects for both parties” (Rojas & González, 2008). The main results indicate that the gross dropout rate calculated per academic semester during the accumulated period of 2000-2006 presents a global average of 13% for Universidad de Ibagué and that it is higher at the Faculty of Engineering and lower in Humanities and Social Sciences. Academic programs present significant internal differences: a high gross rate in Marketing and Electronic Engineering, followed by Accounting and Mechanical and Industrial Engineering. The lowest dropout rate occurs in Economics and Psychology.

Official data shows a fall in the gross dropout rate by undergraduate level cohort in IHEs in Colombia during the period of 2003-2006 and, according to the government, initiatives to combat dropping out have enabled coverage to rise from 21% to 25%, but this does not necessarily imply reduced dropout rates.

In 2005, the MEN, through the Center for Economic Development Studies (CEDE for its acronym in Spanish) at Universidad de los Andes, undertook an institutional project with the participation of 70 universities to design a tool and a methodology to monitor dropout. This study considered two types of dropout: academic (associated with low academic performance) and non-academic (relating to socioeconomic and individual factors) (MEN, 2005).

In this study, CEDE included variables of different characteristics: individual (sex, age, employment status); family (household income, home ownership, number of siblings, mother's educational level); socioeconomic environment (departmental unemployment rate); institutional (institution characteristics, type of program, financial and academic support); and academic (ICFES test score and rate of repetition) (Rojas, 2009).

According to data revealed by Girón & González (2005) in the research conducted in Colombia through the Economics Program at Universidad Javeriana in Cali, a strong relationship was found between dropping out and academic performance. Given that the main factor for many students dropping out of their studies is due, firstly, to poor performance and, secondly, to family support and the lack of vocational guidance on course selection, this could reveal the level of learning attained by students and also their motivation to continue studying until graduation.

The study also found that “the first three semesters constitute the most critical period for students in the Economics Program. Nearly 95% of dropouts due to poor academic performance occur during these semesters” (Girón & González, 2005). Universities know little about the type of young people entering its cloisters and design ways to enter university life based on a series of assumptions about university students that go against their own expectations and youth subjectivities. The excessive quantitative representation consensus on dropouts at university is not an efficient institutional tool to diminish the phenomenon's high social impact, especially in the financial and administrative implications for IHEs.

Álvarez (1997) found in a study designed with the *post-doc* method that half the weight in the decision by dropouts at Universidad Autónoma de Colombia had nothing to do with financial aspects, but that factors such as the human quality of teachers, academic quality of programs, and a university environment that repressed students' cultural manifestations constituted strong reasons for their disappointment.

This is how, during the last two decades, Colombia has made considerable progress in improving access to education and has carried out some improvements in internal efficiency. However, much still needs to be done when the nation faces challenges like low secondary education graduation rates, inequality in access and achievement, and low quality of education. Moreover, the nation's performance in regional and international evaluations shows considerable potential for improvement (Salcedo, 2010).

### Determining Factors

The studies analyzed enable the establishment of different dropout analysis categories: individual; academic; institutional; and socioeconomic factors.

Among the individual factors that become risk elements to dropping out of university, we must consider, according to students' personal and academic biographies, course choice, adaptation to university life, use of psychoactive substances, age, gender, marital status, unfulfilled personal expectations, relationships at home, motivation, personal expectations, health problems, temperament, apathy, propensity towards depression, lack of perspective on the future, and incompatibility of personal values with institutional values.

Currently, studies tend to posit a view that deals with different dropout dimensions. For example, Wilcoxon (2010) observed the phenomenon from the perspective of the different elements that can become risk factors and proposed a study with cross sections in different semesters, concluding that during the first year the factors appearing most frequently have to do with university infrastructure, university sociocultural environment, cognitive factors related to high school accomplishments, performance results, as well as teacher attitudes and skills. During the second year, students' commitment to their course becomes important, along with academic expectations, self-efficacy, and other personal circumstances. During the third year, accessibility to and support from faculty staff and the infrastructure and learning environment appear as predominating factors.

The MEN establishes access to vocational guidance prior to entering university, the student's academic performance, study methodologies used, passing the admissions examination, academic load, and dissatisfaction with the academic program and some faculty staff as variables affecting dropout (MEN, 2009).

Giovagnoli defined dropping out as the:

situation encountered by students when aspiring to but not managing to complete their educational project, considering dropouts as individuals who, as students at an institution of higher education, show no academic activity for two consecutive semesters, which is equivalent to one year of inactivity (Giovagnoli, 2002).

Recent results from monitoring dropouts in IHEs provided by the MEN (2009), show that the main factor in abandoning studies in Colombia lies in the academic dimension associated with the potential or cultural and academic capital with which students enter higher education. Financial and socioeconomic factors are in second place followed by institutional factors

(policies and academic regulations, infrastructure, relationships with faculty staff and other students, quality of programs, retention programs or actions to encourage continued enrollment) and vocational guidance factors.

It is clear that it is important for universities to work on reducing dropouts. In order to do so, it is necessary to be aware of the types of dropout and how to prevent them through academic support programs to identify said factors that promote intervention via strategies for monitoring the attitudes and performance of students with a risk profile, given that, beyond searching for the causes, it is necessary to undertake actions that contribute to understanding this phenomenon. Moreover, it is necessary to conduct an analysis of the university's pedagogical function in light of this problem.

According to Tinto (1993), the difficulties faced by students arise when they do not get fully involved in university life and even the multiple family duties of some students often distance them from this experience. Therefore, on reviewing the research, the involvement of more elements in the issue is evident. Indeed some of these elements, like family and friends, that can be part of the solution, should be part of the student's professional education and provide support and strength.

Research conducted in Virginia by Lee & Choi (2010) considered aspects like students' professional or academic experience, learning skills, psychological attributes, and course design and academic support to be of great influence on students' decisions to not continue with their studies. Furthermore, Chumba (2009) considers that learning can make a big contribution to the process students must have in their education and more so when it comes to collaborative learning, given that it promotes teamwork and socialization, which are fundamental aspects to experiencing university life.

As mentioned by Villamizar & Romero (2011), academic performance is one of the fundamental factors in dropping out. This can be determined by other elements—"psychosocial characteristics such as: age, prior learning experiences, schools attended, gender, socioeconomic situation, family environment, established interpersonal relationships, group make-up, self-perception of qualities" (Villamizar & Romero, 2011), which must be considered when preparing a profile of students at risk of dropping out.



The reason why academic performance is a warning factor in dropping out is because it can be a way of identifying the population most vulnerable to abandoning its studies, given that it is a likelihood for students with poor grades and poor class performance, and who, in the development of their academic activities, generally have less elements to grasp onto when faced with an obstacle and, therefore, decide to drop out.

According to García-Cruz, Guzmán & Martínez (n.d.), the act of evaluating through grades can be taken as a negative element, given that this method is used to identify students as data, however, if it is used to reveal the quality of education given and the students' learning, at-risk individuals could be identified, given that the indicator of good teaching quality is not determined by the final grade, but by the evolution and progress shown by students throughout their educational process.

#### **Theoretical and methodological developments**

One aspect worth highlighting has to do with methodological approaches because IHEs increasingly commit to designing tools and techniques to describe the situation of dropouts or those at risk and to evaluate the cognitive and economic factors, along with academic achievements, as well as the review of cultural factors and student personality.

A different approach may suggest that increased university dropout may also be a symptom of a deep social crisis in assessing university education, especially if we consider that formal education seems to follow a different path from the multiple ways in which youth subjectivities are currently constructed and is a huge disappointment for young people who see in traditional education an unfulfilled historical promise (Reguillo, 2004).

In the social organization, undertaking a professional course in itself affords an indisputable value and it is worth the effort that must be invested. Nevertheless, education as a whole and as a formative system for social existence opportunities for individuals seems to no longer constitute a natural self-reference that moves individuals towards seeking out their university education. Much evidence is available to show that the value of education has been modified and displaced by other types of social interaction forms of individual and collective distinction, where university

education is in the midst of a contemporary crisis, explained, in part, by the inconsistencies between the promises awarded to the disciplines and the possibilities of individuals performing in society and production and consumer systems (Reguillo, 2003).

The first longitudinal studies approached the dropout problem from an individual perspective (social integration) and some external factors that could affect it. Later studies on student dropout divided the research into studies looking into the problem's theoretical depth and those interested in searching for the causes of the phenomenon through empirical evidence. The works have reached a consensus on defining dropout as abandonment that can have different socioeconomic, individual, institutional, and academic causes. Tinto (1989) stated that the dropout phenomenon is fairly complex and implies a variety of perspectives and types of abandonment.

It is clear that it is important for universities to work on reducing dropouts. In order to do so, it is necessary to be aware of the types of dropout and how to prevent them through academic support programs to identify said factors that influence dropout and promote intervention via strategies for monitoring the attitudes and performance of students with a risk profile (Abarca & Sánchez, 2005).

Lee & Choi (2011) considered that challenges and potential in students must be identified, and that course quality must be reviewed and guidance and support for students' emotional and personal difficulties be provided. This was also a concern in the research conducted by Walsh, Larsen & Parry (2009), who applied a questionnaire to 248 students from a university in England on the support most often used by students and found that when experiencing difficulties, students seek religious support, and the support of friends, family, and to a lesser degree the institution. Therefore, they suggest reinforcing specialist support, vocational guidance services and funding, student welfare and health services, and the chaplaincy.

Research proposes recognizing the motivation of dropouts as a vehicle that leads to formulating policies to increase the amount of time young people remain in school systems. This should consider not only the students, but also their teachers, family (income, origin, and employment/unemployment), academic performance and illegal behavior, among other

factors. All this must be studied for the interrelation of each aspect to identify factors that come into play in dropping out (Raczynsky, Espinoza, Ossandón, Ruiz, Ariztia, Valle & Fernández, 2002).

Chile has made a good contribution to those studying this phenomenon. One such study made great efforts to identify predictors of risk, which has become one of the main objectives of the educational community and at which many of the studies should be aimed. Said study helped us understand that this phenomenon is part of a process and is not an isolated individualized event, thus, constant failures lead to school failure and, therefore, to abandoning one's studies (Castro & Rivas, 2006).

From the study conducted at Argentine universities, some actions have been suggested to put a stop to dropping out. These include vocational guidance, introductory courses, lowering false expectations, promoting adaptation, promoting classroom, telephone, and virtual tutoring, and scholarships to identify student weaknesses and strengths and, thus, provide adequate help. The study also suggested bearing in mind methodological aspects like the creation and updating of: "a cadastral record containing student data when registering; career data containing study plan, faculty staff, resources available; and academic records containing classroom attendance and exam results, among others" (Jewsbury & Haefeli, 2000) which will enable the monitoring of student evolution, especially during semesters listed as critical.

Many authors agree that much difficulty exists when creating methodologies that enable the identification of dropouts, therefore, there is a lack of studies in that regard, added to which, most research is aimed at the causes of dropping out. Therefore, creating strategies is complicated because one must be formulated as per difficulty and these are increasingly extended (Lopera, 2008).

In Colombia, for example, the MEN has put into operation the Higher Education Institutions' Dropout Analysis and Prevention System (SPADIES) platform, which collects socioeconomic and academic data on students from different IHEs and enables the establishment of relationships with dropout data.

According to Castaño, Gallón, Gómez & Vásquez (2008), one of their research papers found socioeconomic, family, and cognitive difficulties and concluded that reasons relating to the quality and efficiency of education exist amongst the causes of dropping

out. Furthermore, "Colombia does not have sufficient data to illustrate the size of the phenomenon at undergraduate levels" (Yepes, Beltrán, Arrubla, Marín, Martínez, Tobón & Hoyos, 2007) which is why there is a need to launch SPADIES at universities.

The study conducted in Colombia by Universidad Eafit contributed to understanding this phenomenon, for which three phases were developed: "1. Development of a theoretical methodological framework of the phenomenon; 2. Collection of information from databases at Universidad EAFIT, ICETEX, and SPADIES and of information obtained through semi-structured surveys of dropouts; and 3. Analysis, interpretation, and drawing up of the results" (Montes, Almonacid, Gómez, Zuluaga & Tamayo, 2010). Bearing these elements in mind, the university found that the highest risk was found in males, as well as in those who work and those with low average ICFES scores in subjects related to their discipline. Finally, it was found that dropping out depends greatly on students' ability to complete their studies.

The authors of the study conducted at Fundación Universitaria Los Libertadores in Bogotá, Colombia suggest that it is correct to implement not only financial strategies at universities, but also psychological, institutional, and academic ones. For this purpose, it is necessary to "continue with tutoring related to the subjects in which students are most affected—during the early semesters—providing opportunities for guidance on the university's policies, benefits, and services and the student's professional vocation" (Ariza & Marín, 2009).

Research conducted at Universidad de Ibagué posits that elements of concern exist in terms of dropping out, which are presented as the result of diverse difficulties found within the institution and students. One of these is the migration that occurs within the university and the other is permanent dropout, which is why it is said that a determining factor in these situations is the rigidity of the university's administration system because, according to study participants, this does not enable the distance between the administration and students to be shortened, therefore, one strategy could be to promote closeness between students and the university administration in order to recognize the reasons behind the desire to drop out and to thus develop a plan enabling students to continue and complete their studies (Rojas & González, 2008).

## Research Findings

**Table 1.**  
Research Findings.

Findings	Author
From the documents reviewed, most are interested in identifying the causes. Beyond planning strategies, the intention focuses on identifying and classifying these causes, which can be quite tedious, given that they are increasingly added to the list. For this reason, the ideal would be that when identifying a cause, the strategy to solve such cause were also suggested and such suggestion were also replicated. In summary, so many "causes" have been found that it seems that any factor can be a cause for dropping out. It is not known which combination of factors is best able to explain such cause. Some research papers emphasize institutional variables dependent on the degree of student integration with the institution's academic and social environment.	Álvarez (1997), Colombia; Cabrera <i>et al.</i> (2006), Spain; Castaño <i>et al.</i> (2008), Colombia; García <i>et al.</i> (n. d.), Spain; Jewsbury & Haefeli (2000), Argentina; Lee & Choi (2011), United States of America; Lopera (2008), Colombia; MEN (2005), MEN (2009), MEN (2010), Colombia; Montes <i>et al.</i> (2010), Colombia; Oswald <i>et al.</i> (2004), United States of America; Ramírez & Corvo (2007), Mexico; Reguillo (2003), Mexico; Rojas & González (2008), Colombia; Tinto (1993), Mexico; Villamizar & Romero (2011), Colombia; Vivas (2005), Spain; Wilcoxon (2010), Australia; Yepes <i>et al.</i> (2007), Colombia.
Regarding the economic factor, much divergence is found among the studies. On the one hand, there are those identifying dropping out as being caused by students' low income, which hinders their continuing and completing their professional studies.	Ariza & Marín (2009), Colombia; Castaño <i>et al.</i> (2008), Colombia; MEN (2005), MEN (2009), MEN (2010), Colombia.
On the other hand, we have those who state that the financial situation is not a decisive factor, nor exclusive to dropping out, given that there are many education loan schemes, but even so, dropout rates are high.	Abarca & Sánchez (2005), Costa Rica; Tinto (1993), Mexico.
A portion of the studies reviewed deals with the influence exerted by the personal and family histories of students who decide to drop out because part of their skills and study habits are learned at home.	Cabrera <i>et al.</i> (2006), Spain; Castaño <i>et al.</i> (2008), Colombia; Girón & González (2005), Colombia; MEN (2010), Colombia; Rojas (2009), Colombia; Tinto (1993), Mexico; Villamizar & Romero (2011), Colombia.
Other studies center on placing the responsibility for dropping out on high school education, given that it is assumed that schools should prepare students to deal with university life and life in general. Furthermore, these suggest that this is where academic skills must be enhanced. This is how, according to these authors, prior school experiences can determine—in some cases—student success or failure.	Reguillo (2003), Mexico; Villamizar & Romero (2011), Colombia; Vivas (2005), Spain; Wilcoxon (2010), Australia; Yepes <i>et al.</i> (2007), Colombia.
Unawareness of university life is another factor identified and recognized by many authors, given that, on the one hand, it contributes to creating false expectations that lead to frustration with the university and, on the other, hinders adequate student adaptation to said university culture, which does not only have to do with class schedules.	García <i>et al.</i> (n. d.), Spain; Jewsbury & Haefeli (2000), Argentina; Oswald <i>et al.</i> (2004), United States of America; Tinto (1993), Mexico; Vivas (2005), Spain; Wilcoxon (2010), Australia.
In addition, we find the ambivalent or openly negative attitude that many young students have been developing toward academia. This negative effect has been related to low academic performance and the feeling is that it stems in large part from a lack of vocational guidance, given that this factor appears in many studies as one of the causes that most stands out. Its significance lies in that it can become decisive upon recognizing not only what is desired, but what is suitable for a certain type of personality, character, and ability. This is how students arrive at university with no guidance and soon drop out because this is inadequate.	García <i>et al.</i> (n. d.), Spain; Girón & González (2005), Colombia; Jewsbury & Haefeli (2000), Argentina; MEN (2009 y 2010), Colombia; Rojas & González (2008), Colombia.
Other coincidences reported refer to dropout frequency during the early semesters of university life, a fact that has been associated with adjustment difficulties, which is why the adaptation variable seems to bear great weight. Dropout indicators, like absenteeism and repetition of assignments, have also been described, however, attention continues to be focused on total dissociation and not on gradual dissociation, as would be represented by this evidence.	MEN (2009), Colombia.
Only a few studies show interest in proposing strategies that in some way enable dealing with dropping out.	Ariza & Marín (2009), Colombia; Castro & Rivas (2006), Chile; Montes <i>et al.</i> (2010), Colombia.

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

To end, it is important to highlight that great interest and concern is evident regarding the dropout phenomenon and the development of strategies to curtail the problem. It is important to work with educational institutions and raise awareness with respect to their

shortcomings and student needs in order to meet such needs with academic support programs.

The studies are not satisfactory when trying to apply strategies to deal with difficulties of this size. Only a few people offer feasible alternatives (Castro & Rivas,



2006; Ariza & Marín, 2009; Montes *et al.*, 2010). In general, they are reduced to the realm of institutions and the distinctive features of their students.

The lack of support for regional educational policies to integrate university, society and State in order to offer appropriate conditions for the improvement of educational quality from elementary level and in order to prevent dropping out is evident.

The strategies formulated by universities are not effective enough because they do not have any real impact on educational policies aiming to improve the quality of education, which would be an essential aspect to combat dropping out. Beyond looking for the reasons for students leaving school, it is necessary to act in an effective way in order to contribute to the comprehension of and intervention in this problematic field.

## CONCLUSIONS

Studies on dropout are updated on the educational agenda of the Ministries of Education because it is an issue that affects developed and developing nations. Although there is marked interest in detecting the causes of dropping out, studies have focused on the statistics that need to be known. However, the sociocultural characterization of university students may provide interesting keys to refine studies from qualitative aspects and approach the phenomenon from a more holistic understanding of the problem. Hence the need to address studies that go beyond the statistics to seek out the incidence of the cultural context, the perception of the value of education in today's society, and the problem of young students in adapting to university life.

An important aspect in studies on dropout is the deterministic view of analyzing the problem as a result. This is a phenomenon that has to do with the educational process, i.e., dropping out starts and evolves from elementary education. In this sense, as an example, the low quality of education in countries like Colombia does not foresee the future difficulties of students who are at an academic disadvantage for educational attainment.

In this regard, few studies in Colombia show student vulnerability due to unsatisfactory test performances, given the low-quality education they have received during their elementary education. Results from the most recent PISA evaluation place students from Latin America and the Caribbean in an unfavorable position. "Between 40% and 60% of Latin American students do not attain the performance levels considered to be essential for young students to enter

academic, social, and work life as citizens" (Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura [OEI], 2010).

Dropping out, according to the studies, is a global phenomenon. Nevertheless, incidence rates are proportional to the country's development. Poor-quality education systems enhance the level of vulnerability of students with unsatisfactory academic performance at school, which at university takes the form of dropping out. In other words, one of the major risk factors is poor elementary education.

The problem is not merely SABER test (Colombia) results that identify deficiencies in the mathematical, linguistic, and scientific skills of some students entering university, but also the lack of study habits and knowledge of interaction codes necessary to become independent in learning, schedule management, and time management, in other words, a lack of socialization in knowledge, which implies difficulties for adaptation and the development of basic skills.

Universities and especially those that do not carry out specific selection processes for education in a given discipline receive students with disadvantaged academic potential. Consequently, institutions in some cases promote education on a weak basis that gradually reflects differences in student performance, given their own individual histories. Therefore, dropouts reach their peak during the first three semesters, as indicated by studies.

Colombia has progressed during recent decades in aspects like extending coverage and access to education in all regions of the country. However, improving the quality of education is the biggest challenge in offering a service that promotes social equity. Completing secondary and university studies is no guarantee to securing a job, on the contrary, it is becoming another aspect of exclusion.

It is clear that it is important for universities to work on reducing dropouts. In order to do so, it is necessary to recognize the types of dropout and how to use prevention measures with academic support programs in order to identify factors that impact on dropping out and to promote intervention via strategies to monitor the attitudes and performance of students with a risk profile.

Monitoring the dropout problem has set in place methodologies like SPADIES to measure and study it. This tool enables students to be observed according to dropout risk indicators. But the institutional, academic, and pedagogical conditions at each university,

as well as students' cultural and individual aspects, involve adapting the methodology, broadening the data, conducting follow ups, and systematizing said experience to efficiently intervene in this problem, thus, reducing this phenomenon.

Another group of studies mainly seeks out the causes in individual factors, and others during early childhood, in the individual's relational structure, which supposedly has long-term consequences on the individual's life project, but none of these works establishes relationships among their psychological formulations and other contextual variables besides the family.

The strategies being formulated by universities are insufficient because they do not impact on educational policy in order to improve the quality of education, which would be an essential aspect in preventing this phenomenon.

Finally, dropping out lies in students and their families who see their aspirations cut short with a sense of frustration that generates social immobility. Due to this, educational institutions must commit to greater pedagogical accompaniment for students they receive with higher academic risk.

Beyond the search for the causes of dropping out, it is necessary to execute actions that contribute to the understanding of and intervention in this problem by monitoring, recording and analyzing risk factors and the pedagogical function of the university in light of this type of problem.

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