

Strategies to reduce dropout in higher education

Orlanda Tavares^{1,2} , Cristina Sin² , Maria João Antunes² 

¹Research Centre on Child Studies (CIEC), Institute of Education, University of Minho, Portugal,

²Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Education and Development (CeIED), Lusófona University, Portugal.

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Abstract

This study investigates strategies to reduce higher education dropout from the perspective of course directors. Through semi-structured interviews with directors from various institutions and disciplines, the research identifies key strategies focused on academic achievement, student integration, and financial support. Directors emphasize the importance of close student-teacher relationships, individualised support, and mentoring programmes. They also highlight the need for innovative pedagogical approaches, including interactive teaching methods and technology integration, to engage students actively. Findings suggest the necessity of a holistic approach to student support, integrating academic, financial, and socio-emotional aspects to foster an environment conducive to student success and retention. The paper advocates for strategies that address the complex nature of student dropout and suggests that insights from course directors are instrumental for shaping effective institutional practices and policies.

Keywords: dropout; retention; strategies; practices; Portugal.

1. Introduction

Dropout from higher education continues to represent a serious problem globally (OECD, 2022). Only 39% of full-time students across OECD countries complete within the official duration and, even three years later, the completion rate only reaches 68%. Portugal is no exception to this trend, with dropout being slightly below the OECD average (OECD, 2022). Students who abandon their studies are more prone to unemployment (Ferrão & Almeida, 2018), but higher education institutions and the society also suffer the negative consequences of dropout (Behr, et al., 2020). For this reason, countries and institutions have adopted policies and strategies to diminish dropout. These need to consider the increasing diversity of the student

body, including students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, adult learners or part-time students who work at the same time.

Institutions resort to various strategies to improve retention. The provision of support services, especially for non-traditional or disadvantaged students, is the most documented one (Almeida et al., 2012; Dawson et al., 2020; Delnoij et al., 2020; Jones, 2015). Support varies from the development of academic and study skills to guidance in choosing subjects, to social support or psychological support. A literature review on the characteristics of effective interventions (Delnoij et al., 2020) concluded that coaching, remedial teaching and peer mentoring significantly increase completion rates. A common element of successful programmes in improving retention is the existence of a mentor, advisor, or counsellor who provides students with comprehensive guidance to help them overcome academic, personal or financial barriers (Dawson et al., 2020). Programmes promoting the “culture of belonging” also stand out, such as residential summer schools before entry, orientation programmes, extracurricular activities or emotional support from teachers and peers (Thomas et al., 2017). Financial support is a specific category worth highlighting, e.g. free use of manuals, transport passes, emergency financial assistance, exemption from exam fees or merit scholarships (Dawson et al., 2020).

The reorganisation of course delivery, both in terms of timetable and structure represents another institutional strategy to improve academic success. Timetable reorganisation became necessary following the increasing presence of students who reconcile studies with work. After-work classes or part-time options are measures taken in this sense (Almeida et al., 2012). Another approach involves “structured schedules” (classes occupy the same interval every day, allowing for easier scheduling) and predictability (Jones, 2015).

Pedagogic approaches, too, are employed to increase students’ motivation and success. Using technology is one way to ensure the relevance and quality of teaching and learning for diverse groups of students. Besides facilitating access to higher education, it can make classes more engaging and increase student performance (Devlin & McKay, 2016). Then, pedagogical approaches that involve students in the construction of knowledge through project-based learning and problem-based learning, simulating real professional contexts (Chen & Yang 2019), are innovative methodologies proven to be effective in engaging students, boosting motivation and increasing interest (Bender, 2012). Relying on technology, the flipped learning model can positively influence several domains, from learning and communication to empathy and collaboration (Cueva & Inga, 2022). Since dropout is often related to a lack of commitment because of conflicting obligations, innovative teaching and learning approaches which bring together formal education and the workplace emerge as another way to improve retention. Such work-based learning partnerships allow working students to enroll in higher education while continuing to work (Boud, 2006; Hartmann et al., 2009). Internships, practical projects and other forms of experiential learning incorporated into higher education curricula allow students to

apply theoretical knowledge to work contexts. This renders them more aware of the value of academic training for their professional careers.

A useful perspective which can offer insights into institutional strategies and practices is that of course directors. Given their daily, relatively close, interaction with students on their course and the struggles they face, they are aware of the ways in which dropout is tackled via institutional strategies and practices. Even more importantly, their views are valuable because they are aware not only of official structures and initiatives, but also of everyday practices employed informally and of potential measures that could help students stay on course. Against this background, this paper aims to answer the following research questions: What are the course directors' perceptions of the strategies and practices adopted in their institutions to address dropout? What additional measures could be taken to encourage student retention?

2. Methodology

A study conducted in 2023 aimed to understand course directors' perspectives on dropout, including strategies to reduce it, via semi-structured interviews in diverse educational institutions, including universities and polytechnics, across public and private sectors. The study focused on a range of educational levels (higher technical and professional courses - CTeSP, bachelor's, and master's degrees). Contact was made via email with course directors from different disciplines and educational levels, resulting in virtual interviews via Zoom with eighteen course directors. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic and professional attributes of the interviewees, including gender, academic level of the programmes they coordinate, disciplinary area and the type of institution in which they work.

The study maintained high ethical standards, having obtained participant consent for recorded and transcribed interviews, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The flexible interview structure allowed for open discussions about strategies to reduce student dropout rates and suggestions for future initiatives. For analysis, the study used MAXQDA software, following Corbin and Strauss's (1990) grounded theory.

3. Findings

This section presents the findings categorised into two main dimensions: the ongoing institutional strategies and the recommendations for future initiatives aimed at reducing student dropout rates.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewees

Interview	Gender	Type of qualification	Disciplinary area	Type of institution
1	Male	CTeSP	Arts	Public Polytechnic
2	Male	CTeSP	Arts	Public Polytechnic
3	Male	CTeSP	Law	Private Polytechnic
4	Male	CTeSP	Engineering	Public Polytechnic
5	Male	Bachelor	Engineering	Public University
6	Male	Bachelor	Engineering	Public Polytechnic
7	Male	Bachelor	Engineering	Public Polytechnic
8	Male	Master	Engineering	Private University
9	Female	Master	Engineering	Public University
10	Female	Bachelor	Management	Public University
11	Female	Bachelor	Management	Public University
12	Male	Bachelor	Management	Public Polytechnic
13	Female	Bachelor	Management	Public Polytechnic
14	Female	Master	Management	Public Polytechnic
15	Female	Master	Education	Public Polytechnic
16	Female	Master	Education	Public Polytechnic
17	Female	Master	Education	Public Polytechnic
18	Female	Master	Education	Private Polytechnic

3.1. Ongoing institutional strategies to prevent student dropout

The course directors mentioned three dropout prevention strategies: those pertaining to academic achievement, which are more prevalent in polytechnic institutions; those concerning student integration, predominantly emphasized in universities; and those addressing financial support, which are particularly highlighted in polytechnic institutions. The course directors tended to point to strategies related to students' academic achievement as the biggest protective factor: individualised support and monitoring by teachers acting as advisors are seen as decisive, especially in master's courses where the internship/dissertation is a vulnerable period:

In recent years, what we've done is to have regular meetings with them. It was an activity that I made a priority as course director (...) And this has in fact greatly increased our success rate. (...) We know that there are always losses, but what we want to do is minimise those losses and so (...) above all, the relationship with the students has to be very close. (Interviewee 4)

Offering study support and complementary sessions is pointed out as another relevant dropout prevention strategy in engineering, management and education courses alike, although the interviewed directors mention some lack of student participation in these sessions.

Yes, another thing we've done is create support for some subjects, but then the students don't turn up, we've also created sessions to explain study techniques, working methods, all of this we've done, but often there's very little take-up of this type of offer. (Interviewee 17)

The second most mentioned type of dropout prevention strategy includes initiatives aimed at integrating students. In this area, mentoring programmes occupy a prominent place, and there has even been a Portuguese Mentoring/Tutoring Network in the country since 2018. These programmes, which work based on peer relationships, end up having a dual function because they contribute to academic integration, but they are also a space to support curricular success, as described in the excerpt below:

It's a programme based on a support network, on social support. Basically, the older, more experienced students, in principle from the same study programme and from the second or third year, support them, give them some instructions, pointers, tips, share study materials. (Interviewee 16)

The process of integrating students is also often affected by mental health issues. The course directors mention various situations requiring psychological support, as well as the importance of these services in the institutions. Some directors mentioned more recurrent situations in recent years related to social anxiety, as mentioned in the extract below.

We had a situation last year where a student asked not to present her work in front of her classmates because she felt embarrassed and couldn't do it. (Interviewee 3)

Financial support also holds an important place in institutional dropout prevention, although it is not the most frequently mentioned aspect. Support for student accommodation, social canteens and social grants are particularly significant in this regard. In addition to these aspects, there is sometimes support that responds to contextual needs, such as, for example, in the case of institutions located in areas with harsh winters (support for heating accommodation). Nonetheless, student accommodation is highlighted as a central concern today and various adopted measures, or under consideration, are mentioned.

It's recognised that there are difficulties in finding accommodation. And what we're trying to do is to extend the public residences and network with the private ones. (Interviewee 6)

3.2. Recommendations for future initiatives

A prevalent theme mentioned by course directors as a way to reduce dropout was increasing student engagement and motivation. Directors suggested evolving the educator's role from merely teaching to validating information, reflecting the shift to online learning resources. They recommended interactive, practical teaching methods over traditional lectures, incorporating

tools like "serious games", updating curricula to match student interests, and involving students in course design. This approach positions educators as mediators, countering misinformation and fostering a more engaging, practical learning environment.

When I start going through content, within 10 minutes eyes start rolling, phones come out. Attention just fades away, more and more. I've been asking myself, "Where do I begin? Maybe I should kick off with a case study, or dive straight into an exercise." (Interviewee 2)

Directors advocate for transparent course planning, interactive pedagogies, and the integration of tech tools and serious games to balance educational depth with enjoyment, thus enhancing student engagement. They emphasise curricula that reflect student interests and encourage collaborative, inquiry-based learning, fostering a participatory, dynamic educational environment. Additionally, directors call for a holistic approach to student motivation, including reimagining physical learning spaces. They suggest redesigning higher education facilities to mirror contemporary, inviting office spaces, arguing that just as companies revamped offices post-pandemic to motivate staff, educational institutions should also make classrooms and campuses more appealing to boost student motivation and engagement:

Why don't we make our learning spaces more like the welcoming atmosphere of our homes? Soften the coldness, the heavy institutional feel of these educational settings. (Interviewee 2)

The second identified key theme was the promotion of student integration to reduce dropout rates. Academic leaders emphasise the role of peer relationships, student organizations, and strong faculty-student bonds in creating a sense of belonging. They note the particular challenges of integrating international students and recommend enhanced support for them. Suggestions also include personalized approaches, mentoring, and a focus on student well-being to cultivate a positive, inclusive atmosphere that helps lower dropout rates.

So, essentially, the fact that students feel supported not just by their peers, or the student union, or those groups, but by the lecturers themselves, feeling like they have a second home at the institution, I really think that contributes massively to preventing dropouts. Because they genuinely feel more supported. (Interviewee 10)

Addressing financial barriers was also an issue deemed as crucial to reduce dropouts, with suggestions ranging from need-based financial aid and affordable housing to incentives like tuition fee refunds for high achievers. Reducing the overall financial strain through lower tuition or increased support is vital for broader access to higher education. There is a call for government funding to improve student well-being, including physical and mental health, as these significantly impact dropout rates. It is also recommended that universities mandatorily

provide mental health information and support, aiding students in addressing issues that may impede their academic success.

Mental health is a big topic nowadays, sadly for the wrong reasons, and it shouldn't be an optional thing for each institution, but rather a mandatory responsibility for them all. (Interviewee 3)

Some directors also mentioned that reducing class sizes is crucial for lowering dropout rates. They argue that large classes hinder effective teaching, especially in subjects needing personalised attention. The challenge of providing individual support in classes with 45 to 50 or more students is highlighted, along with concerns about the impersonal nature of such large classes and the struggle to meet individual learning needs.

Some directors finally emphasised the importance of mentorship programs, professorial tutors, and direct communication for tailored guidance and support. They advocate for early, interest-based career guidance to prevent choices driven by financial pressure. Addressing student preparedness, they suggest initial assessments in subjects like Mathematics and Physics, followed by targeted foundational courses. Recognising the potential for early career decisions to be premature, some propose a flexible educational system that allows exploration before committing to a career path, ensuring choices align with true interests and skills:

I think in other European countries, especially in Germany, there's already an effort to guide students during their high school years. This kind of guidance should exist, and often it shouldn't just be left to students to find their path. (Interviewee 7).

These approaches might collectively contribute to a more inclusive and supportive higher education environment, ultimately reducing dropout rates and enhancing student success.

4. Conclusion

This paper analysed course directors' perceptions on strategies and practices in higher education institutions to enhance student retention. Findings resonate with the literature's emphasis on comprehensive support systems, englobing academic, integration, and financial strategies. Key elements include personalised support, mentoring programs, and financial aid. Student-teacher relationships and academic support sessions are also emphasised. Educators' evolving role is highlighted, pointing to the need for pedagogical innovation, interactive teaching methods, technology integration and fostering a sense of belonging. These approaches align with the call for student-centred, engaging educational environments (Behr et al., 2020) and are crucial in enhancing student retention. The study highlights the complexity of dropout and the necessity of a holistic approach, integrating academic, financial, and socio-emotional support. The insights form a valuable basis for future research and policy-making, aiming to improve student success and resilience.

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