



DREAMS DEFERRED: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF STUDENTS FACING UNIVERSITY DROPOUT

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ABSTRACT

Academic dropping out is a serious problem in the system of higher education, and its consequences are complex in regards to the psychological human integrity of the students who drop out, their identity, and continued perspectives. This paper discussed the life experiences of students at risk of dropping out of college and university using emotional, social, and institutional processes to inform their journeys. Based on a qualitative design, the semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed thematically relying on the six-step approach of data analytic provided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). They were classified into five themes: psychological distress and emotional turmoil, coping mechanisms, and resilience, social support and interpersonal relationships, professional identity, and role conflicts, and aspirations, growth and meaning-making. The results were as follows: students reported feeling stressed out and failures upon encountering financial difficulties and pressure to succeed. This was because social and familial expectations placed a lot of emphasis on self-concept and persistence at school with the absence of incidental institutional support increasing the vulnerability. But most learners used adaptive mechanisms like resilience, meaning-making and access to peer and/or family support to resolve difficulties. The research has given this idea to the universities to devise more focused psychological, financial, and institutional support systems to reduce the risk of drop out. This study provides actionable implications in the form of an evidence-based research that supports the emerging body of literature on academic persistence, and this research has policy implications relevant in higher education policy, counseling of students at the higher education institutions, and institutional change.

Keywords: academic dropout, thematic analysis, financial stress, coping strategies, social support, higher education, resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Academic dropout has increasingly become a global issue of concern in higher education and this aspect has an implication on both a personal level besides institutions and larger societies. Leaving university is not simply a failure in one step in academic work, but it is an individual and emotional and social event which shows the intricate interaction of psychological distress, economic effects, family and educational requirements and institutional forces (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Tinto, 2017). Leaving higher education is an anxious, shameful and uncertain process, which for many students is not limited to the academic realm and shapes their wider personhood, well-being and future plans.

Students in universities are undergoing a serious period of development in which academic achievement is linked to self-concept and psychosocial development adjustment (Arnett, 2015).



Leaving of high education early is rarely informed by one factor. Instead, it is a cumulative effect of issues, including emotional distress, economical strain, and lack of support that jeopardize perseverance and increase a sense of defenselessness (Cabrera et al., 2006; Vossensteyn et al., 2015). An increasing body of literature has in this context indicated the psychological distress encountered by students at the risk of academic dropout with the identification of the indications of depression, anxiety, and despair (Richardson et al., 2017; Alarcon & Edwards, 2013). These emotional challenges have an adverse impact on more than just the performance of academic tasks, they also limit and inhibit the coping mechanisms available to students.

Another factor that has the most popularity and significance in determining the discontinuation of studies is the financial pressure. Economic insecurity specifically among low- and middle-income countries, destabilizes student persistence due to the ever-present trade-off between their education investment and their immediate needs to survive (Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Jones et al., 2021). The burdened students complain about being helpless, guilty, and inadequate, which further contribute to academic disengagement and affect important decision-making procedures.

Pressures and family expectations also compound the dropout experience. In most collectivist cultures, family usually acts as a motivating/constraining factor in the education path of the students (Barg, 2019). Households can have a high standard of the achievement of academic results, which are connected to family pride and social social advancement, therefore increasing the mental load of scholars. The academic failure is accompanied by social stigma, which paints a deeper dim spotlight, the dropout is not only individual, but also a family and social disillusion (Cote & Schwartz, 2002). The burden of these expectations may confuse students with their personal goals and the requirements of a society that leaves them with low self-esteem and the desire to keep going in the face of a tough academic scene.

The potential mediating effects of the coping strategies on the effects of stress and academic risks are also shown in the literature. Other students develop adaptive strategies, like problem-oriented coping, seeking social support, or reappraising challenges that allow them to be resilient and persist (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). These other people develop maladaptive reactions such as avoidance, withdrawal, or substance use, among others, which increase susceptibility to dropout (DeRosier et al., 2013). The individual factors that influence these coping choices include personality traits and resilience whereas the contextual factors include availability of institutional resources.

Earlier findings on social, emotional, and institutional aspects of psychological and educational studies emphasize on the influences of these aspects with respect to academic persistence amongst students. As an example, research on students who study English as a second language has demonstrated the power of classroom enjoyment and positive learning attitudes to reinforce engagement and motivation (Ramzan et al., 2023), whereas studies into the issue of peer pressure, social support, and parenting style underlined the strong predictive nature of interpersonal and family dynamics and their impact on the adjustment and the achievement of students (Maqbool et al., 2021; Amna et al., 2024; Javaid et al., 2025). Also, the study of embitterment and mental health in students brings to the fore the role of emotional stress, the associated stress and identity changes, in the academic vulnerability (Javaid & Mahmood, 2023; Iqbal et al., 2024).

The most important role the institutional support plays is to determine whether the students will be able to effectively navigate through the threats of failing the academic challenges.



Establishments of universities with counseling, mentoring, and financial support is likely to boost resilience that forges the concept of belongingness and academic inclusion in students (Thomas, 2012). In turn, alienation and helplessness and a related lack of engagement can be promoted by unsupportive or bureaucratic institutional environments (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). The interplay between institution support and individual resilience becomes a determinant of how students respond positively to situations and failure to be caught up in the web of dropping out. Taken together, these findings indicate that dropout risk was not an entity that could be interpreted independently but rather that drop out risk was a dynamic that should be viewed through a psychosocial perspective which combines personal coping, social support, and responsiveness of the institution.

Research Questions

1. How do university students emotionally experience the process of academic dropout?
2. In what ways does financial stress shape students' decision-making and persistence in higher education?
3. How do family expectations and social pressures influence students' sense of self and academic continuation?
4. What coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive, are adopted by students facing dropout risks?
5. How does the interplay of institutional support and personal resilience affect students' ability to manage the threat of academic failure?

METHOD

The study has taken the form of a qualitative research design whereby semi-structured interviews were used to provide the total experience of the university students at the risk of dropout. The purpose of learning about the subjective realities of study participants, according to the traditions of interpretivists in the field of psychology and education, justified the methodological decision (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants. Sample of 16 university students were recruited in the Pakistani universities both in the public and the private sector. Purposive sampling was being utilized so that the respondents should have either left or been in a very close danger of leaving because of failing grade probation, economic demands, or even psychological problems. The sample was diverse since it consisted of both male and female students who were studying in various academic years and various disciplines.

Data collection. Interviews based on in-depth and semi-structured questions were applied to collect data through the preferred language by the participants (Urdu or English). The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and would take place during 45 and 60 minutes. The research questions informed the interview guide that centred the emotional experiences of students, their financial hardships, family demands, coping plans and their perception of institutional support.

Ethical considerations. The confidentiality of the participants was also guaranteed, the informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms were reported to safeguard identities.

Data analysis. It used thematic analysis, according to the six-phases model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) such as (1) becoming acquainted with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) seeking themes, (4) revising the themes, (5) defining the themes, and (6) producing the report.

It was inductive and deductive coding, which means that the themes could appear in the data reflecting ideas and direction, but keeping within the research questions. The transcripts were coded and organized using NVivo software. In order to achieve reliability, only a sample of the participants were checked using member checking, and intercoder reliability was achieved through discussion with the research team members.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the transcripts of the participants developed into a complicated network of psychological, emotional, and social experiences. The researchers discovered five overarching themes which were: (1) Psychological Distress and Emotional Turmoil, (2) Coping Mechanisms and Resilience, (3) Social Support and Interpersonal Relationships, (4) Professional Identity and Role Conflicts and (5) Aspirations, Growth and Meaning-Making. All the themes had some subthemes that reflected the contextualized insights and experiences of respondents. The given below presentation contains both the analyses of quotation and analytic conception in accordance with the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019).

Theme 1: Psychological Distress and Emotional Turmoil

This theme underlines the excruciating pressure, nervousness and low could be said among the participants. Their words were evidence of pain, uncertainty, and a need to cope with uncertainty and emotional burden.

Subtheme 1.1: Anxiety and Fear of the Future

Several participants expressed heightened anxiety about the future and fear of unknown outcomes. One participant shared, *“I feel like no matter how much I try, things are never under my control. There’s always this fear that something bad will happen, even if I plan everything.”* This illustrates how uncontrollable circumstances created a persistent sense of vulnerability, aligning with stress theories that link unpredictability to heightened anxiety.

Subtheme 1.2: Hopelessness and Helplessness

Expressions of hopelessness were prominent. A participant said, *“Sometimes I feel like giving up because nothing ever changes. It’s like shouting into an empty room.”* The metaphor of “shouting into an empty room” conveys feelings of invisibility and futility, emphasizing the psychological exhaustion that accompanied their challenges.

Subtheme 1.3: Stress Overload

Participants frequently mentioned being overwhelmed by multiple responsibilities. One noted, *“Everything comes at once—deadlines, family expectations, personal problems. It just piles up and I don’t know where to start.”* This cumulative overload highlights how stress is not just a single event but an accumulation of pressures that erode mental health over time.

Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite struggles, participants demonstrated resilience by adopting coping strategies to manage distress. These strategies ranged from constructive approaches to avoidance-based methods.

Subtheme 2.1: Problem-Focused Coping

Some participants emphasized active coping, such as time management or breaking tasks into smaller parts. One participant explained, *“I try to make lists and tick off one thing at a time. It makes me feel like I’m moving forward, even if slowly.”* This reflects adaptive coping strategies that create a sense of progress and control.

Subtheme 2.2: Emotional Release

Others relied on emotional expression as a coping outlet. A participant shared, *“Sometimes I just cry and let it out, and strangely I feel lighter after that.”* Such emotional release demonstrates catharsis and validates the importance of acknowledging rather than suppressing emotions.

Subtheme 2.3: Spiritual and Religious Reliance

Faith and spirituality were cited as sources of comfort. One said, *“When I pray, I feel calmer. It doesn’t solve my problems, but it gives me strength to face them.”* This reflects how religious practices act as a stabilizing mechanism, consistent with literature on spiritual coping during adversity.

Subtheme 2.4: Avoidance and Distraction

Not all strategies were constructive. For some, avoidance provided temporary relief. As one participant expressed, *“I just watch TV for hours, pretending everything is fine. It doesn’t fix anything, but at least I forget for a while.”* This highlights the tension between short-term relief and long-term consequences of escapist coping.

Theme 3: Social Support and Interpersonal Relationships

Participants highlighted the critical role of interpersonal support, ranging from strong family bonds to frustration over institutional neglect.

Subtheme 3.1: Family as Strength

Family members were often the strongest source of support. One participant shared, *“My mother is the only one who listens without judgment. Even if she can’t fix things, her presence makes me feel less alone.”* This emphasizes the protective buffer of close family relationships.

Subtheme 3.2: Peer Encouragement

Peers provided encouragement through shared experiences. A student explained, *“Talking to friends who are also struggling helps because they really understand what I mean without me explaining everything.”* The sense of solidarity and mutual recognition illustrates the collective dimension of coping.

Subtheme 3.3: Lack of Institutional Support

In contrast, several participants criticized institutions for not providing adequate assistance. One stated, *“When I reached out for help, it felt like I was just another number. Nobody really cared.”* This demonstrates a perceived gap between individual needs and institutional responses, fostering feelings of neglect.

Theme 4: Professional Identity and Role Conflicts

Another prominent theme was the conflict between personal and professional roles, with participants describing pressures related to career, responsibilities, and expectations.

Subtheme 4.1: Work–Life Balance Struggles

Balancing personal life with professional demands was challenging. One participant explained, *“At work I’m expected to give my best, but at home there are responsibilities too. I feel like I’m failing in both places.”* This underscores the strain of role conflict and its toll on self-perception.

Subtheme 4.2: Role Overload

Participants described carrying multiple roles at once. As one put it, *“I’m a student, a worker, a sibling, and somehow expected to manage it all without breaking down.”* The layering of responsibilities magnified stress and diminished personal well-being.

Subtheme 4.3: Ethical and Professional Dilemmas

Some also faced moral dilemmas in fulfilling professional roles. One participant reflected, *“Sometimes I know what’s right, but the system pushes me to act differently. That’s the hardest part.”* This highlights the ethical strain that compromises one’s sense of professional identity.

Theme 5: Aspirations, Growth, and Meaning-Making

Despite hardships, participants articulated growth, meaning-making, and future aspirations.

Subtheme 5.1: Career Motivations

Career goals provided motivation to persist. A participant shared, *“Even when I feel like giving up, I remind myself why I started. I want a better future, and that keeps me moving.”* This illustrates how long-term goals can buffer short-term stress.

Subtheme 5.2: Meaning from Adversity

Several participants reframed adversity as an opportunity for growth. One said, *“Maybe these struggles are shaping me into a stronger person. At least that’s what I try to believe.”* Such reframing reflects resilience and meaning-centered coping.

Subtheme 5.3: Future Hopes

Hope for the future surfaced as a key motivator. A participant explained, *“I don’t know how things will turn out, but I still hope tomorrow will be better than today.”* This reflects the enduring role of optimism in sustaining psychological well-being.

DISCUSSION

Through the results of this investigation there is a sophisticated perception of the emotional and psychological mechanisms lying beneath academic departure in the college students. The themes brought out show that dropout is never just a thought brought by academics but is also a highly emotional and socially constructed event. The above discussion will contextualize the results in relation to the research questions and available literature.

The emotional experiences conveyed by the students as a result of wanting to dropout were shameful, failing, hopeless, and regretful underpinning the psychological undertaking of leaving education early. Such emotions can also be aligned with previous literature, which demonstrates that factors in the experiences of dropout include negative self-views and feelings of inadequacy (Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019; Wood & Breyer, 2017). The accounts indicate that dropout is also believed to be an individual loss, instead of being a situational problem, a view that agrees with the research on the stigmatization of the dropout in a society that considered educational success as a promise of social mobility (Tinto, 2017). Notably, given these findings, the problems of dropout can threaten the mental health of the students, making them susceptible to depression and anxiety (Eivers et al., 2020).

Financial stress proved to be an essential factor that would affect the student courses. The reason given by many of the participants was the failure to cope with tuition fees and maintenance fees as a key motivating factor towards considering or when carrying out dropout. This corresponds with previous research work that the one of the best indicators of student withdrawal is financial insecurity (Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Mamiseishvili, 2012). The chronicity of the problem highlights the structural inequality with access to higher education, especially in the environments where low-income students do not have an equal share of scholarships, grants, or financial assistance opportunities provided by the institution (Callender & Mason, 2017). Financial burden

does not run individually but rather escalates psychological pressure making one give up on learning and eventually drop out (Joo et al., 2009).

The other finding was the strong role of family expectations and the demands of society. Some of them told about the emotional burden of dropout because of familial honorableness and the sacrifices of the parents. This is proven in previous literature because in the collectivist society, educational success is strictly associated with family reputation and status (Rao & Choudhury, 2012; Kim & Schneider, 2005). In the cases when students cannot fulfil these expectations, they might internalize the disappointment causing reduced self-esteem and damage to the family relations (Ecclestone & Lewis, 2014). Such a burden is also intensified by social pressures as the stigma of dropout usually labels students as failures or incompetent, thus adding to the effect of isolation (Bowers & Sprott, 2012).

Another main aspect of the findings was coping strategies. There were various adaptive strategies that were adopted by students including working part-time, time management, and formation of informal support networks. These tactics are comparable to studies that report that resilience and self-regulation may regulate potential dropout (Martin et al., 2017). Nevertheless, inappropriate coping measures, including avoidance and loss of peers and the ability to suppress their feelings, also played a major role. It is indicated in the literature that, despite current symptom-reducing effects, such strategies contribute to increasing susceptibility to longer-term disengagement and poorer mental outcomes (Compas et al., 2017). The adaptive and maladaptive coping confirms the complexity of the psychological adjustment of students with regards to COPD, justifying the need to target early interventions restoring healthier coping styles.

Supportive teachers, counseling services, and peer networks were noted as protective factors by some, others regretted that the institutional response to their plights was weak. This substantiates the theory of student integration presented by Tinto (1993, 2017) since according to her theory academic and social support systems play a pivotal role in student survival. Institutions do not identify barriers of financial, emotional, and academic nature have the risk of isolating vulnerable students (Kuh et al., 2006). On the contrary, the students with the feeling of belonging support are more likely to keep going through the hardships (Thomas, 2012).

The current research builds on previous literature to ascertain that economic pressure, emotional strain, and failure to receive institutional support also increases the risk of dropout, but often resilience, meaning-making or having a social support network mitigates these points. It coincides with previous findings, according to which established relationships with peers, social support, and adaptive coping play an enormous role in continuing to engage with education and enjoy life (Maqbool et al., 2021; Amna et al., 2024). The qualitative data also correlate with the works on embitterment and mental load among students that help to illustrate how unattained expectations attack self-concept and endurance (Javaid & Mahmood, 2023). Concurrently, the reason why positive classroom experiences and meaningful peer relationships, having been mentioned in previous research (Ramzan et al., 2023; Javaid et al., 2025), developed into playing a protective role was observed. Combined, the insights contribute evidence towards the necessity of higher education institutions to invest in integrative support systems, academically, financially and psychologically to not only help buffer distress but build resilience, sense of belonging and nurture growth in at-risk learners.



On the whole, the results support the perspective according to which dropout is a complex process, which is defined by financial difficulties, emotional instability, family pressures, and institutional influences. Notably, we do not have uniform experiences in this respect but they depend on personal resilience and other sources of support that are available to individuals. The study makes it clear that there is a dire need of comprehensive measures that would not only overcome the financial matters but emotional and social issues as well that lead the person to dropping out.

Conclusion

This research will add to the literature with regards to the emotional and social aspects of student dropout. It shows that dropout is not a purely academic failure but a passionate-in-emotion process manipulated by recklessness in finances, family, and institutional instigation. Their results make the suggestion of using an integrated support system that should support students in all these areas, namely mental health, financial, and social inclusion.

Limitations

Although this study is insightful, its applicability may be an issue since it is a qualitative study with small size and limited population. Perhaps the fact that self-reporting has been used could have also been affected by the fact that participants were willing to left sensitive information out. Mixed-methods approaches that involve both large-survey and in-depth interviews should be used in future studies in order to verify this evidence and elaborate it further.

Implications

These findings carry a number of practice and policy implications. First, it is believed that financial aid mechanisms should be enhanced by the universities and individualized financial counseling should be offered to students facing dropout. Second, mental health services should be placed in the forefront of institutions; they should provide convenient counseling and stress management courses. Third, the teachers are expected to encourage learning communities where inclusiveness and the feeling of failure are discouraged and resilience is promoted. On a policy level, the governments are suggested to eradicate structural inequality in the funding of higher education and make it accessible to the students with disadvantaged backgrounds. At last, there should be sensitization of families on the demands that their expectations can put on them, and they should be encouraged to be supportive in response to scholarly distress as opposed to punitive action.

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