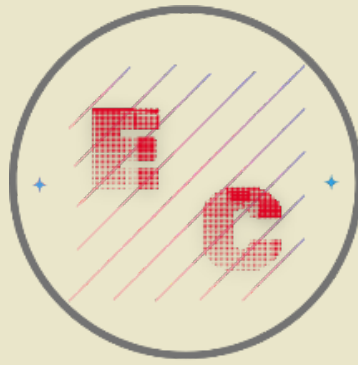




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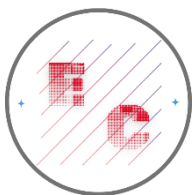
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**BEYOND DISTANCE LEARNING: UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS BEHIND
STUDENT DROPOUT IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION
PROGRAM.**

**MÁS ALLÁ DE LA EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA: COMPRENSIÓN DE LOS
FACTORES ASOCIADOS AL ABANDONO ESTUDIANTIL EN UN PROGRAMA DE
FORMACIÓN DE DOCENTES DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS.**

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Colombia

Beyond distance learning: understanding the factors behind student dropout in a foreign language teacher education program.

Más allá de la educación a distancia: comprensión de los factores asociados al abandono estudiantil en un programa de formación de docentes de lenguas extranjeras.

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the phenomenon of student dropout in higher education. It is considered a multidimensional phenomenon, requiring an understanding of the interaction between various economic, academic, institutional, occupational, familial, personal and vocational factors. The study examined the factors associated with academic dropout in a distance-learning Bachelor's degree program in foreign languages at a private university in Bogotá, Colombia. A mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design was employed for data collection. In the quantitative phase, 22 former students completed a survey designed to identify factors related to their decision to drop out of the program. Subsequently, three participants were

interviewed in more depth to gain a better understanding of their experiences and the circumstances surrounding their decision. Frequency and percentage calculations were used to analyze the quantitative data, while thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative information. The findings showed that dropping out was not associated with a single factor, but rather with the convergence of various circumstances. Integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings also made it possible to identify individual experiences that were not necessarily apparent in the overall trends, particularly regarding career choices. In conclusion, dropping out of school in this context cannot be understood solely in terms of the characteristics of distance learning, but rather through the interplay of economic, employment, institutional, academic, personal and vocational conditions that shape students' educational trajectories.

Keywords: academic dropout; higher education; distance learning; student retention; training of foreign language educators; associated factors.

RESUMEN

Este estudio aborda el fenómeno del abandono estudiantil en la educación superior, concebido como un fenómeno multidimensional, cuya comprensión requiere considerar la interacción entre diversos factores de orden económico, académico, institucional, laboral, familiar, personal y vocacional. El propósito fue examinar los factores asociados con la deserción académica en un programa de Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras en modalidad a distancia de una universidad privada en Bogotá, Colombia. e adoptó un enfoque mixto con diseño secuencial explicativo. En la fase cuantitativa del estudio participaron 22 exestudiantes, quienes respondieron a una encuesta diseñada para identificar los factores relacionados con su decisión de abandonar el programa. Posteriormente, se implementaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a tres participantes con el propósito de profundizar en las experiencias y circunstancias asociadas con dicha decisión. Para el análisis de los datos cuantitativos, se

implementó la técnica de frecuencia y porcentajes, mientras que la información cualitativa se examinó mediante el análisis temático. Los hallazgos demostraron que el abandono no se asoció con un único factor, sino con la convergencia de diversas circunstancias. La integración de los hallazgos cuantitativos y cualitativos permitió, además, reconocer experiencias individuales que no necesariamente fueron visibles en las tendencias generales, particularmente en relación con la elección vocacional. Se concluye que el abandono de la educación en este contexto no puede comprenderse exclusivamente a partir de las características de la modalidad a distancia, sino desde la interacción de las condiciones económicas, laborales, institucionales, académicas, personales y vocacionales que configuran las trayectorias educativas de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: deserción académica; educación superior; educación a distancia; retención estudiantil; formación de educadores en lenguas extranjeras; factores asociados.

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INTRODUCTION

When students withdraw from a distance education program, the modality itself may appear to be an immediate explanation for their decision. Distance learning demands students to organize their time, engage in autonomous learning, and adapt to forms of interaction that may differ from those experienced in face-to-face education. In certain instances, these demands, in conjunction with feelings of isolation, have the potential to impact students' adaptation to the learning environment and their capacity to maintain their studies.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that student attrition is seldom the consequence of a solitary event. A multitude of factors, including financial pressures, employment responsibilities, family commitments, academic demands, personal circumstances, and institutional support, have the potential to intersect and influence students' ability to continue their education. To comprehend

the phenomenon of attrition in distance higher education, it is necessary to consider factors beyond the specific modality itself, and to analyze the broader conditions that surround students' educational trajectories, (Abril et al., 2008).

However, student dropout is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by the interaction of academic, personal, institutional, and social factors. Several theoretical models suggest that students' persistence in higher education depends not only on students' individual characteristics but also on their ability to adapt to the academic environment and integrate into university life. This is due to the lack of adequate support, activities, and resources, which have been identified as key factors contributing to this issue, according to Bravo (2015), the lack of organizational mechanisms and state and governmental support, coupled with economic constraints, are among the key drivers of this problem.

Roca-Cuberes (2012) identifies that there are three types of causes of dropping out, which are: 1) -Personal, which is seen that the individual tends to drop out because of lack of knowledge or motivation; 2) socio-economic because of lack of students' resources and income; and 3) institutional due to lack of opportunities that limit the integration and learning offered by the institution. In the words of Pérez (2023, p. 5), university dropouts can be related to personal, social, and academic factors that affect the students' lives and make it difficult for them to remain in the educational institution. For his part, the educational psychologist Muñoz & Martínez (2017), points out that 'dropping out of university can be a consequence of lack of motivation, social pressure, economic problems or simply the student's lack of interest in the career he or she has chosen'. It is important to bear in mind that dropping out of university does not only affect the student but also has repercussions for society.

Although much of the above literature focuses on higher education, recent Colombian studies at other educational levels also provide relevant evidence of the multidimensional nature of dropout. For example, Tamayo et al. (2026) identified socioeconomic, family, academic and motivational factors associated with dropping out of school in Soledad, Atlántico. They also

highlighted teacher and family support, as well as personal aspirations, as factors that may encourage students to persist with their education. Similarly, Sánchez Solanar et al. (2026) emphasized the interaction of socioeconomic, academic, family and motivational factors, and Aguirre Varelas et al. (2026) identified economic hardship, inadequate educational infrastructure, transport difficulties, violence and limited institutional support in a rural Antioquia context. While these studies were not conducted in higher education, they provide recent Colombian evidence that educational dropout occurs within a broader network of interconnected personal, socioeconomic, family, academic and institutional conditions.

There have been different research and studies that establish the influence of this type of variable in the decision to abandon. Abello et al. (2012), for example, point out the importance of relationships with friends and teachers to strengthen the academic adaptation process. For his part, Corominas (2001) highlights the importance of social integration as a factor of permanence. Also, the correct academic adaptation, especially measured through performance, it seems appear as a protective factor against abandonment as has been found in Esteban's study, Bernardo and Rodríguez-Muñiz (2015)

Some students may show an apparent attitude of total lack of motivation, which may hide social conflicts and strategies of escape from confrontation with evaluations and group opinions, Chalcán-Velásquez & Delgado-Portilla, 2020). According to Deci and Ryan (2001), they may feel frustrated if the career they have chosen does not convince them as an adequate means to satisfy their goals, which may lead to a short-term dropout. (Gámez et al., 2008), factors such as lack of supervision, poor motivation, inadequate course design, and inexperience of instructors may hinder learning and push students towards dropout. Frankola (2001), another shortcoming is the lack of vocational orientation program at previous educational levels, which can lead to students entering university without a real interest in their chosen career, affecting their motivation and learning. Rinaudo et al. (2003) are just some of the possible causes of lack of motivation in university students.

In the study on life concerns among university students, it is mentioned that financial difficulties are presented at a very low frequency among the main concerns of students. This suggests that, at least in the sample studied, financial worries are not a predominant issue compared to other aspects such as personal problems, adaptation to the new stage of life, family problems, and interpersonal relationships. According to Cornejo & Lucero (2006). Family engagement can significantly influence the academic engagement of university students. Although not always recognized as a relevant factor in studies on academic engagement, the family can exert a motivational and economic influence on young people, encouraging their attachment to a university career, promoting good study habits and helping them to persist in the face of difficulties, Vasquez & Torres (2026). According to Borzone (2017), family support can be critical to the academic success of university students. Studies such as Rojas (2011) and Yang & Chang (2010) have highlighted the importance of family support in the motivation and academic performance of young people.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2016), dropping out of higher education reduces a country's opportunities for economic and social development, as it prevents the training of qualified professionals who are committed to their environment. Foreign language teacher education represents a particularly complex educational context, as these programs integrate linguistic development with pedagogical, didactic, research, technological, and intercultural competencies required for future professional practice (Osorio et al., 2020; Cely-Betancourt, 2023). Despite the existence of prior research identifying numerous factors associated with student attrition in higher education, comparatively little attention has been paid to the exploration of how these factors interact in the experiences of students who withdraw from distance foreign language teacher education programs. The relevance of this context stems from the fact that students may face several demands and responsibilities that compete for their time and attention. These include academic demands, employment obligations, financial constraints, family commitments, and the requirements of

learning in a distance modality. The analysis of the experiences of former students can therefore provide a more contextualized understanding of the circumstances associated with withdrawal and contribute evidence for developing more responsive student retention and support strategies.

Based on the problem identified and the need to better understand the factors associated with student dropout in the bachelor's degree in foreign Languages with an Emphasis on English at a private university in Bogota Colombia, the following research objective was established to guide this study: To analyze the factors associated with student dropout in the bachelor's degree in foreign Languages with an Emphasis on English, offered through distance education. The research question that guided this study was: *¿What factors were associated with students' decisions to withdraw from the bachelor's degree in foreign Languages with an Emphasis on English?*

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed descriptive explanatory sequential mixed methods design to examine the factors associated with student attrition in a distance bachelor's degree in foreign Languages. The quantitative phase of the study employed a survey to identify the prevalence of factors associated with participants' decisions to withdraw. After this, a qualitative phase was initiated, comprising semi-structured interviews. The purpose of this phase was to explore former students' experiences in greater depth and to provide further insight into the factors identified in the quantitative phase. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the circumstances associated with student withdrawal.

Setting and Participants

The participants were 22 former students who had been enrolled in the bachelor's degree in foreign Languages with an Emphasis on English, offered through distance education at a private university in Bogotá, Colombia, and who had withdrawn from the program before completing their studies. Participants were identified through former classmates who had shared academic spaces with them and had subsequently noticed that they were no longer enrolled in the program. This situation initially led to an examination of the number of students who had discontinued their studies, thus arousing the researchers' interest in the examination of the factors associated with student withdrawal. Potential participants were contacted using contact information that their former classmates had retained from previous academic interactions. To be considered for this program, it is necessary to have been enrolled and to have withdrawn prior to the completion of the program. All 22 former students contacted for the study completed the survey, and three of them participated in the semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection Instruments

Survey: Quantitative data were collected through a survey designed to examine the factors associated with participants' decisions to withdraw from the program. The instrument consisted of 28 items organized into nine categories: economic, academic, institutional, vocational/career choice, work and time, family, social/interpersonal, personal/psychological, and technological/access factors. Participants rated each statement using a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (the factor did not influence their decision to withdraw) to 5 (the factor was a determining reason for withdrawal). The survey also included three supplementary questions addressing the main reason for withdrawal, the institutional support received during their studies, and their intention to resume their studies.

Semi-structured Interview: Qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews with three former students who had previously participated in the survey. The interview comprised five open-ended questions, the purpose of which was to explore participants' experiences in the program and the circumstances that influenced their decisions

to withdraw. The semi-structured format enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide further insight into factors that could not be fully captured through the survey.

Data analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the survey was analyzed using RStudio. Descriptive statistical analyses, incorporating frequencies and percentages, were conducted to identify the factors most frequently associated with participants' decisions to withdraw from the program. The results were organized according to the categories established in the survey instrument to facilitate their interpretation.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews, with an open coding process being utilized. The responses given by participants were subjected to coding and grouping according to recurring patterns related to their experiences and reasons for withdrawal. These patterns were subsequently organized into broader themes aligned with the research objectives. In conclusion, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation stage, through the comparison of patterns across both datasets. Areas of convergence, divergence, and complementarity were examined to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors associated with student withdrawal.

Ethics

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved prior to taking part in the research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed that the information they provided would be treated confidentially and used exclusively for research purposes. To protect their identities, no real names were used when reporting the findings. The three interview participants were identified using the codes P1, P2 and P3. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences. The

researchers ensured that the information collected was handled confidentially throughout the study.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

The survey presented below aims to characterize the general aspects of the participating population, such as age, gender, the semester in which they dropped out of the academic program, and their occupation at the time of withdrawal. It also presents the results obtained from the application of a data collection instrument to 22 former students at a private University in Bogotá. The instrument was structured around nine determining factors associated with university dropout: economic, academic, institutional, vocational or career choice, work and time management, family, social or interpersonal, personal or psychological, and technological or access. Each of these factors included three key questions, designed to systematically identify and analyze the main reasons that influenced the participants' decision to interrupt their academic path in higher education.

Table 1.

Participants age

		Age			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Under 20	2	9,1	9,1	9,1
	20 -24	9	40,9	40,9	50,0
	25 -30	5	22,7	22,7	72,7
	31- 35	4	18,2	18,2	90,9
	Over 40	2	9,1	9,1	100,0
	Total	22	100,0	100,0	

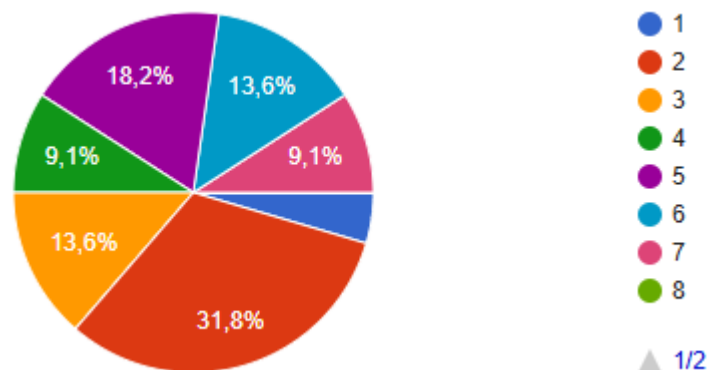
Note: Table 3 presents the age distribution of the 22 former students who participated in the survey, which allows for the contextualization of the sociodemographic profile of the population that withdrew from the academic program.

Table 2.

Participants' Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Female	14	63.6%	63.6%	63.6%
Male	8	36.4%	36.4%	100.0%
Total	22	100.0%	100.0%	

Note: The table presents the gender distribution of the 22 former students who participated in the study. The results indicate a predominance of female participants, who represent 63.6% of the total sample (n = 14), while male participants account for 36.4% (n = 8).

Figure 1*Semester in which university was abandoned*

Student dropouts are predominantly concentrated in the early stages of the academic trajectory, particularly during the second semester, which accounts for 31.8% of the total responses. This finding suggests that the transition and adaptation period to higher education represents a critical phase in which students are more vulnerable to discontinuing their studies. A second cluster of withdrawals is observed in the third and sixth semesters, each representing 13.6% of the sample. These figures indicate that, beyond the initial adjustment period, dropout may also occur at intermediate stages of the program, potentially because of increased academic demands, cumulative workload, or the emergence of external pressures such as employment or family responsibilities.

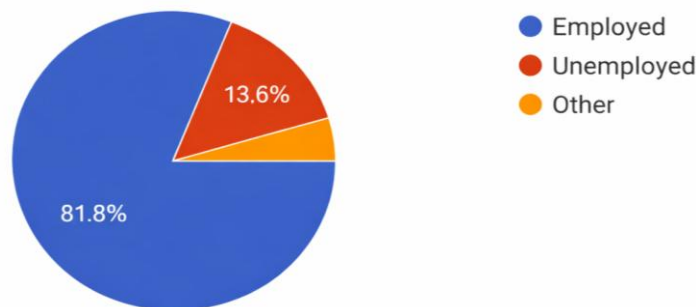
Additionally, the fifth semester registers 18.2% of the withdrawals, reflecting a notable proportion of students who discontinued their studies after having progressed through a significant portion of the curriculum. This pattern may be associated with factors such as academic fatigue, decreased motivation, or a reassessment of vocational expectations once students have gained deeper exposure to the program's academic content.

Lower dropout rates are observed in the fourth, seventh, and eighth semesters, each accounting for 9.1% of the responses, while the first semester shows the lowest proportion of withdrawals. This distribution suggests that students who overcome the initial stages of the program may develop stronger academic integration; however, persistence is not guaranteed, as personal, academic, and contextual factors may still influence the decision to abandon at later stages.

Figure 2

Current occupation

22 responses



A clear predominance of participants who are currently employed, representing 81.8% of the total sample. This finding suggests that most students who withdrew from the bachelor's degree in foreign Languages are actively engaged in the labor market, which may have influenced their decision to discontinue their academic studies. In contrast, 13.6% of the participants reported being unemployed at the time of data collection. This proportion indicates that, for a smaller segment of the sample, the absence of stable employment may have

coincided with academic withdrawal, potentially reflecting economic instability or difficulties in sustaining the financial demands associated with higher education.

The results are organized according to the seven categories established in the survey instrument: Economic Factors, Academic Factors, Institutional Factors, Vocational Factors, Work Factors, Family Factors, and Social Factors. Each category is presented separately to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the factors that influenced students' decisions to withdraw from the program.

Table 3 summarizes participants' responses to the 22 items organized into the seven categories established in the research instrument. To facilitate interpretation, each category is analyzed separately in the following sections.

Table 3.

Summary of Participants' Responses to Factors Associated with Student Dropout

Factor	Survey item	Disagreement (%)	Neutral (%)	Agreement (%)
Economic	Lack of money	36.4	13.6	50.0
	Other financial priorities	31.8	13.6	54.5
	Barriers to obtaining a scholarship	45.5	22.7	31.8
Academic	Unsuitable teaching methods	54.5	18.2	27.3
	Heavy academic workload	77.3	9.1	13.6
	Lack of vocational guidance from teachers	68.2	22.7	9.1
Institutional	Insufficient university resources	72.7	13.6	13.6
	Insufficient university support	50.0	13.6	36.4
	Institutional barriers to obtaining a scholarship	54.5	13.6	31.8
Vocational	Inflexible schedules	59.1	18.2	22.7
	Incorrect program choice	72.7	13.6	13.6
	Loss of interest in the program	72.7	4.5	22.7
	Mismatch between personal skills and program requirements	77.3	9.1	13.6
Work-related	Lack of time	68.2	4.5	27.3

	Long working hours and inability to attend virtual classes	54.5	9.1	36.4
	Difficulty balancing family, work and study	68.2	4.5	27.3
Family	Lack of family support	90.9	0.0	9.1
	Family responsibilities	68.2	4.5	27.3
	Family problems or conflicts	63.6	13.6	22.7
Social/interpersonal	Lack of empathy from classmates	90.9	0.0	9.1
	Differences with teachers and classmates	86.4	0.0	13.6
	Lack of belonging within the student group	86.4	4.5	9.1
Personal/psychological	Lack of motivation	68.2	4.5	27.3
	Physical and mental exhaustion	36.4	31.8	31.8
	Stress or anxiety	50.0	22.7	27.3
Technological/access	Lack of access to a computer	90.9	4.5	4.5
	Distance between home and the university	77.3	0.0	22.7
	Difficulties using virtual platforms	90.9	0.0	9.1

Note: 22 for each item. Disagreement combines “Strongly disagree” and “Disagree”; Agreement combines “Agree” and “Strongly agree”. Minor differences in totals may result from rounding. The abbreviated item descriptions retain the meaning of the original survey statements.

Economic factors

The economic factors category examined the extent to which insufficient financial resources, competing financial priorities and difficulties accessing scholarships influenced participants' decisions to withdraw from the program. While financial pressures were not uniformly experienced by all participants, this category contained the two survey items with the highest proportions of agreement. Regarding lack of money specifically, half of the participants (50.0%, $n = 11$) strongly agreed that this was the main reason for withdrawing from their studies. In contrast, 36.4% ($n = 8$) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, while 13.6% ($n = 3$) selected the neutral response.

Of the three economic indicators, competing financial priorities presented the highest level of agreement. Overall, 54.5% of participants ($n = 12$) agreed or strongly agreed that competing financial priorities had affected their studies and contributed to their withdrawal.

A different response pattern was observed regarding barriers to obtaining a scholarship. While 31.8% of participants ($n = 7$) agreed or strongly agreed that these barriers contributed to dropping out of university, 45.5% ($n = 10$) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 22.7% ($n = 5$) selected the neutral response. A different response pattern was observed regarding barriers to obtaining a scholarship. While 31.8% of participants ($n = 7$) agreed or strongly agreed that these barriers contributed to dropping out of university, 45.5% ($n = 10$) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 22.7% ($n = 5$) selected the neutral response. Overall, the findings suggest that immediate financial constraints and competing economic priorities were more frequently associated with withdrawal than difficulties in accessing scholarships.

Academic factors

The academic factors investigated whether teaching methodologies, academic workload, vocational guidance and the university's perceived ability to deliver a quality education influenced participants' decisions to withdraw from the program. Overall, the responses showed a predominance of disagreement across the four indicators. Regarding teaching methodologies, 54.5% of participants ($n = 12$) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the approaches used by their teachers had prevented them from continuing their studies. In contrast, 27.3% ($n = 6$) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 18.2% ($n = 4$) selected the neutral response.

The strongest concentration of disagreement was found in academic workload. A total of 77.3% of participants ($n = 17$) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that their decision to leave the program was influenced by workload. Only 13.6% ($n = 3$) agreed or strongly agreed, while 9.1% ($n = 2$) remained neutral. A similar pattern emerged regarding the lack of vocational guidance from teachers. Here, 68.2% of participants ($n = 15$) disagreed or strongly disagreed that insufficient guidance had influenced their decision, while 9.1% ($n = 2$) strongly agreed. The

remaining 22.7% (n = 5) selected the neutral response — the highest proportion of neutrality among the four academic indicators.

Participants also tended to reject the statement that the university lacked the necessary capacity to provide quality education. A total of 72.7% (n = 16) disagreed or strongly disagreed that this issue had motivated their decision to withdraw. By comparison, 13.6% (n = 3) agreed or strongly agreed, while another 13.6% (n = 3) selected the neutral response. Taken together, these findings indicate that academic factors were not predominant explanations for withdrawal among most participants.

Institutional factors

The institutional factors category investigated whether insufficient university support, barriers to accessing scholarships and restricted scheduling options influenced participants' decisions to withdraw from the program. Overall, most participants did not identify these institutional conditions as the main reasons for leaving their studies. Regarding university support, 50.0% of participants (n = 11) strongly disagreed that the institution had failed to provide the necessary assistance for them to continue their studies. In contrast, 36.4% (n = 8) agreed or strongly agreed that insufficient support from the university had influenced their decision to withdraw, while 13.6% (n = 3) selected the neutral response.

A similar pattern was observed in relation to schedule flexibility. Overall, 59.1% of participants (n = 13) disagreed or strongly disagreed that inflexible schedules had influenced their decision to leave the program. Conversely, 22.7% (n = 5) strongly agreed that this condition had contributed to their withdrawal, while 18.2% (n = 4) selected the neutral response. Taken together, the findings suggest that institutional factors were not uniformly perceived across the sample. The highest level of agreement was obtained by insufficient university support (36.4%), followed by barriers to accessing scholarships (31.8%) and limited schedule flexibility (22.7%).

Vocational/career choice factors

The vocational factors category investigated whether participants' choice of program, changes in their academic interests and the perceived alignment between their personal abilities and program requirements had influenced their decision to withdraw. Overall, most participants did not identify vocational factors as the main reason for leaving their studies. Regarding program choice, 72.7% of participants (n = 16) disagreed or strongly disagreed that selecting the wrong program had influenced their decision to withdraw. In contrast, 13.6% (n = 3) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while a further 13.6% (n = 3) selected the neutral response.

Loss of interest overtime received the highest level of agreement within this category. While 72.7% of participants (n = 16) disagreed or strongly disagreed that declining interest had contributed to their withdrawal, 22.7% (n = 5) agreed or strongly agreed that this factor had influenced their decision. Only 4.5% (n = 1) selected the neutral response. The perceived mismatch between students' skills and interests, and the program's requirements, received the highest level of disagreement. A total of 77.3% of participants (n = 17) disagreed or strongly disagreed that this mismatch had influenced their decision to withdraw. Conversely, 13.6% (n = 3) agreed or strongly agreed, while 9.1% (n = 2) were neutral.

Overall, the findings show that vocational factors were not widely identified as reasons for withdrawal within the sample. Loss of interest over time received the highest level of agreement (22.7%), while choosing the wrong program and experiencing a mismatch between personal abilities, interests and program requirements each received 13.6% agreement.

Work and time factors

The work and time factors examined whether limited time, employment schedules, and difficulties balancing family, work, and academic responsibilities influenced participants' decisions to withdraw from the program. Regarding general time constraints, 68.2% of participants (n = 15) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that a lack of time had affected their academic performance and contributed to their withdrawal. In

contrast, 27.3% (n = 6) strongly agreed with the statement, while 4.5% (n = 1) selected the neutral response. It is noteworthy that all participants who identified this factor selected the option of 'Strongly agree'.

Conflicts between work schedules and class attendance were the most prevalent source of disagreement within this category. While 54.5% of participants (n = 12) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement that extended working hours and challenges in attending online classes had influenced their withdrawal, 36.4% (n = 8) indicated agreement or strong agreement. The remaining 9.1% (n = 2) selected the neutral response. The challenges experienced in achieving equilibrium between familial obligations, professional commitments, and academic responsibilities exhibited a consistent pattern. A total of 68.2% of participants (n = 15) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that this situation had led them to discontinue their participation in the program. Conversely, 27.3% (n = 6) of respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement, while 4.5% (n = 1) remained neutral. The findings, when considered as a whole, demonstrate that work and time factors were not perceived uniformly across the sample. The most prevalent form of disagreement was observed to be conflicts between working hours and class attendance, with 36.4% of respondents expressing concern. This was followed by general time constraints and difficulties balancing family, work, and studies, which each accounted for 27.3% of responses.

Family factors

The family factors category examined the influence of three factors on participants' decisions to withdraw from the program: insufficient family support, family responsibilities, and family conflicts. In general, most respondents did not attribute their decision to leave their studies to family-related circumstances. The lowest level of agreement within this category was obtained by the lack of family support. A total of 90.9% of participants (n = 20) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that insufficient support from their

families had been a key factor in their withdrawal. In contrast, 9.1% (n = 2) of participants strongly agreed with the statement, and no participants selected the neutral response or agree. The impact of family responsibilities was found to be comparatively greater. While 68.2% of participants (n = 15) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that these obligations had impeded their pursuit of university studies, 27.3% (n = 6) concurred or strongly concurred with the statement. The remaining 4.5% (n = 1) selected the neutral response. The results of the survey revealed that 63.6% (n = 14) of respondents strongly disagreed that these circumstances had reduced their motivation to continue studying, whereas 22.7% (n = 5) strongly agreed. The remaining 13.6% (n = 3) selected the neutral response. All participants who reported their influence selected 'Strongly agree'. The results of the study demonstrate that family factors were not perceived uniformly across the sample. The highest level of agreement was obtained by family responsibilities (27.3%), followed by family problems or conflicts (22.7%) and insufficient family support (9.1%).

Social/interpersonal factors

The social factors category examined whether a lack of empathy from classmates, interpersonal conflicts, and a limited sense of belonging influenced participants' decisions to withdraw from the program. Regarding relationships with classmates, 90.9% of participants (n = 20) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that a lack of peer empathy had influenced their withdrawal. In contrast, 9.1% (n = 2) of participants expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement, and no participants selected the neutral response.

Conflicts with teachers and classmates obtained the highest level of agreement within this category. A total of 86.4% of participants (n = 19) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that interpersonal conflicts had contributed to their withdrawal. In contrast, 13.6% (n = 3) of the participants strongly agreed with the statement, while no participants selected the Agree or neutral response. Most participants, constituting 86.4% of the

sample (n = 19), expressed strong disagreement with the assertion that their inability to assimilate within their student group had influenced their decision to withdraw. Conversely, 9.1% (n = 2) strongly agreed, and 4.5% (n = 1) selected the neutral response.

The findings, when considered as a whole, indicate that social factors were not widely perceived as reasons for withdrawal within the sample. Conflicts with teachers and classmates obtained the highest level of agreement (13.6%), followed by a lack of empathy from classmates and a limited sense of belonging (9.1% each).

Personal/psychological factors

The personal and psychological factors category examined the influence of motivation, exhaustion, stress and anxiety on the decisions of participants to withdraw from the program. In contrast to categories that exhibited a distinct concentration of responses, these indicators manifested varying degrees of agreement, disagreement, and neutrality. Regarding the issue of motivation, 68.2% of participants (n = 15) expressed strong disagreement with the assertion that this factor had led them to discontinue their studies. Conversely, 27.3% (n = 6) strongly agreed, while 4.5% (n = 1) selected the neutral response. It is noteworthy that no participants selected the intermediate categories of Disagree or Agree.

The distribution within the category was found to be most balanced in cases of physical and mental exhaustion. A total of 36.4% of participants (n = 8) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that exhaustion had contributed to their withdrawal, while 31.8% (n = 7) expressed agreement or strong agreement with this assertion. Furthermore, an additional 31.8% (n = 7) of respondents selected the neutral response. The comparable proportions observed across the three response categories imply that the role of exhaustion was not uniform or clearly delineated within the sample. Half of the participants (50.0%, n = 11) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement that these conditions had affected their academic continuity. In contrast, 27.3% (n = 6) strongly agreed that high levels of stress or anxiety had influenced their withdrawal, while 22.7% (n = 5) selected the neutral response.

The findings, considered as a whole, demonstrate that personal and psychological factors were experienced differently across participants. The most prevalent responses were physical and mental exhaustion (31.8%), followed by lack of motivation and stress or anxiety (27.3% each). The substantial proportion of neutral responses for exhaustion (31.8%) and stress or anxiety (22.7%) further differentiates these indicators from lack of motivation, which elicited more polarized responses.

Technological/access factors

The technological and accessibility factors category examined whether the lack of a computer, the distance between participants' homes and the university, and difficulties using virtual learning platforms influenced their decisions to withdraw from the program. In general, the majority of participants did not identify these conditions as the primary factors contributing to their decision to discontinue their academic pursuits.

Regarding access to electronic equipment, 90.9% of participants ($n = 20$) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that the absence of a computer had resulted in their withdrawal from their studies. In contrast, 4.5% ($n = 1$) strongly agreed with the statement, while another 4.5% ($n = 1$) selected the neutral response. Geographical accessibility achieved the highest level of agreement within this category. A total of 77.3% of participants ($n = 17$) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that the distance between their homes and the university had influenced their withdrawal. In contrast, 22.7% ($n = 5$) of participants expressed agreement or strong agreement with the statement, and no participants selected the neutral response. Most participants, constituting 90.9% of the sample ($n = 20$), expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the assertion that challenges associated with these platforms had influenced their withdrawal. Conversely, 9.1% ($n = 2$) of participants expressed agreement or strong agreement, while no participants selected the neutral response.

When considered as a whole, the findings suggest that technological and accessibility conditions were not generalized explanations for withdrawal. The highest level of agreement was observed among participants regarding the distance between their places of residence and the university (22.7%), followed by difficulties using virtual learning platforms (9.1%) and lack of access to a computer (4.5%).

Supplementary survey findings

Table 4.

Supplementary survey findings

Supplementary question	Main findings
Principal reason for withdrawal	Lack of financial resources: 27.3% (n = 6); teaching methodologies: 18.2% (n = 4); health problems: 13.6% (n = 3); insufficient time: 9.1% (n = 2); other responses: 4.5% each (n = 1).
Reported university support	No support received: 63.6% (n = 14); unaware of available services: 18.2% (n = 4); scholarship: 13.6% (n = 3); academic support: 4.5% (n = 1); psychological/emotional support: 0%.
Intention to resume studies	Would return to the same university: 77.3% (n = 17); would choose another institution: 22.7% (n = 5).

Note. Percentages are based on the total sample (N = 22). The table summarizes responses to the three supplementary closed-ended survey questions. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Qualitative findings

The qualitative findings were based on three semi-structured interviews with former students, identified as P1, P2, and P3. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, and selected excerpts were translated into English for reporting purposes. Four recurring themes were identified: reasons for withdrawal, institutional support, work and time management, and future educational aspirations.

Theme 1. Reasons for Student Withdrawal: Participants described different pathways to withdrawal. Financial difficulties were central to the experiences of P1 and P2, with P1 referring

to difficulties covering tuition fees and P2 identifying financial constraints alongside schedule-related challenges. In contrast, P3 associated withdrawal primarily with a mismatch between personal interests and the teaching-oriented nature of the programme. These accounts illustrate that withdrawal emerged from different combinations of economic, employment-related, and vocational circumstances.

Theme 2. Institutional Support: Experiences of institutional support varied across participants. P2 reported receiving follow-up calls and emails, whereas P1 did not report assistance that directly addressed the financial circumstances underlying the interruption. P3 referred to a payment option that would have facilitated continuation. Overall, the accounts distinguish between institutional contact and support that directly responded to participants' specific needs.

Theme 3. Work and Time Management: Work and time constraints were particularly relevant to P1 and P2. Their accounts showed that employment, financial needs, and time availability were interconnected, as the need to work could limit participation in academic activities. This pattern was not evident in P3's account, whose withdrawal was associated primarily with vocational misalignment.

Theme 4. Future Educational Aspirations: Withdrawal did not necessarily represent the end of participants' educational aspirations. P1 and P2 expressed intentions to resume their studies if their financial, employment, and time circumstances improved. P3 also considered continuing in higher education but in a field more closely aligned with personal vocational interests. Thus, withdrawal represented either a potentially temporary interruption or a redirection of the educational trajectory.

Overall, the qualitative findings reveal that withdrawal resulted from different combinations of circumstances. Financial constraints and work-related time limitations were prominent in the accounts of P1 and P2, while P3's experience was shaped by a mismatch between personal interests and the professional orientation of the program. Institutional

responses also varied and did not necessarily address the specific circumstances underlying withdrawal. Nevertheless, the three participants retained some interest in higher education, either by considering a return to the program or by planning to pursue a different academic field.

Summary of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings indicates that participants' withdrawal decisions cannot be explained by a single factor. These results do not mean that the factors examined were irrelevant; instead, they demonstrate that their influence varied according to participants' circumstances. Financial difficulties emerged as one of the most consistent findings across both components. The interviews added depth to this result, as P1 and P2 described financial limitations as central to their decisions. Thus, the qualitative accounts showed how economic constraints could interact with other aspects of participants' lives rather than operating in isolation. Work and time demand constitute another point of convergence. General time constraints and difficulties balancing family, work, and studies were each identified by 27.3% of respondents. These patterns were reflected in the interviews with P1 and P2, who described difficulties managing their studies alongside employment and other responsibilities. The interviews further revealed that employment served a dual role: it provided the income necessary to study but simultaneously reduced the time available for academic participation.

Institutional support presented a more complex pattern. In the Likert-scale results, 36.4% of respondents indicated that insufficient university support had influenced their withdrawal. In the complementary question, 63.6% reported receiving no institutional support, and 18.2% were unaware that such services existed. These results are not necessarily contradictory because the questions measured different aspects: one examined whether insufficient support contributed to withdrawal, while the other documented whether support had been received or was known to participants. The interviews clarified this distinction. P2 received follow-up calls and emails, whereas P1 did not report assistance that addressed the financial difficulty behind the

interruption, and P3 mentioned a payment alternative that could have facilitated continuation. Therefore, institutional contact did not always correspond to the practical support participants needed. Academic, vocational, and psychological factors were relevant to groups rather than to the sample.

The experience of P3 illustrates how a factor reported by a relatively small quantitative subgroup can still be decisive at the individual level. Only 13.6% of survey respondents associated withdrawal with choosing the wrong program or with a mismatch between their interests and program requirements. Nevertheless, vocational misalignment was the central explanation in P3's account, as the participant was interested in learning English but not in becoming a teacher. This finding demonstrates how aggregate percentages can conceal the importance of less frequent but highly influential individual circumstances.

Family, social, and technological factors obtained comparatively low levels of agreement. These factors were also not prominent in the interviews. Participants' intentions to resume higher education provide a final point of connection between the two components. The interviews showed that these intentions were often conditional. Withdrawal therefore did not necessarily represent a permanent rejection of higher education; for some participants, it constituted a temporary interruption, while for another it represented a redirection of their academic trajectory. Overall, the findings portray student withdrawal as a heterogeneous and multifactorial process. Financial limitations, employment responsibilities, time availability, and access to appropriate institutional support were the most consistently visible conditions across the quantitative and qualitative evidence. Consequently, withdrawal should be understood as the result of different combinations of circumstances rather than as the consequence of a single generalized cause.

DISCUSSION

The economic factors demonstrated clear convergence with previous research. The relationship between financial limitations and university dropout has been a subject of consistent research (Tuz Rosales, 2024; Chalacán & Delgado, 2020; González Cortez & Carrión Berrú, 2024). It has been demonstrated that students often must manage educational costs alongside other financial demands, and that this is particularly true when they are required to pay for university in a country where the cost of living is high (Tuz Rosales, 2024). In the present study, 50% of participants strongly agreed that lack of financial resources was a significant reason for withdrawal, while 54.5% agreed or strongly agreed that competing financial priorities had an adverse effect on their studies. Financial constraints were also the most frequently selected principal reason in the supplementary question and were prominent in two of the three interviews. The findings of this study indicate that economic pressures continue to be a significant factor in the persistence of students in distance higher education, potentially interacting with employment-related and time-related demands.

Institutional support was identified as a salient dimension when the findings were compared with those of previous research. As asserted by Camián Acosta (2023) and Montoya Gutiérrez (2016), the significance of academic and psychosocial support in fostering student retention is paramount. In the present study, 63.6% of participants reported that they had received no institutional support, while 18.2% were unaware of the available services. The interviews further suggested a distinction between institutional contact and assistance that responded directly to students' financial, academic, or personal needs. These findings underscore the significance of providing support mechanisms and ensuring that students are cognisant of and able to access support that is commensurate with their circumstances.

The findings also partially align with research linking withdrawal to employment and family responsibilities (Castillo, 2022; Espitia Carrascal & Montes Rótela, 2009; Saavedra & Suárez, 2002). However, employment-related constraints were more evident than family factors

in the present study. Conflicts between working hours and class attendance demonstrated the highest degree of agreement within the work and time category, while family responsibilities and conflicts were reported by a smaller proportion of participants. The interviews yielded further insights into this relationship, particularly for P1 and P2, whose accounts demonstrated how employment could concurrently provide the financial resources necessary for study and reduce the time available for academic engagement.

A notable divergence emerged in relation to social and interpersonal factors. As indicated by Elías Andreu (2008) and Camián Acosta (2023), earlier studies have linked dropout with restricted social integration, loneliness, discrimination, and challenges in establishing relationships within university communities. In contrast, most participants in the present study rejected the notion that withdrawal was attributable to a lack of peer empathy, interpersonal conflicts, and a limited sense of belonging. These factors were also largely absent from the qualitative accounts. Consequently, within the context of distance education, social and interpersonal challenges appeared less pronounced than economic, employment-related, and temporal factors.

A more nuanced relationship with previous research was revealed by vocational factors. Despite the identification of inappropriate program choice as a significant contributing factor to early university dropout (Elías Andreu, 2008; Botella, 2000), the survey results indicated relatively low levels of agreement regarding vocational factors. However, the qualitative findings complicate this pattern: vocational mismatch was central to P3's decision to withdraw, as the participant's interest in learning English did not correspond with the teaching-oriented professional trajectory of the program. This finding illustrates the value of integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, as a factor with relatively low prevalence at the group level may still be decisive within an individual educational trajectory.

A particularly salient finding pertains to technological and access-related factors, given that the study was conducted within the context of a distance education program. Contrary to

prevailing assumptions within this field, technological difficulties were not the most reported condition associated with withdrawal. Most participants (90.9%) disagreed with the assertion that their decision to depart from the program was influenced by factors such as limited access to computers or challenges in utilizing virtual learning platforms. Geographical distance demonstrated a slightly higher degree of relevance, although it was associated with withdrawal by a mere 22.7% of participants. The findings of this study indicate that, within the specified group of former students, the phenomenon of withdrawal cannot be comprehensively understood by focusing primarily on the technological or access-related characteristics of distance education. Instead, the broader findings indicate that economic pressures, employment and time constraints, institutional support, and individual circumstances are all relevant factors. In this sense, a comprehensive understanding of withdrawal necessitates an examination that extends beyond the modality itself, encompassing the broader conditions that influence students' educational trajectories.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study demonstrates that student withdrawal from the distance foreign language teacher education program was associated with multiple and intersecting circumstances, rather than with a single dominant factor. It is evident from the quantitative and qualitative findings that economic constraints are one of the most consistent conditions, frequently intersecting with employment responsibilities and limited time. Conversely, technological difficulties, restricted access to computers, and challenges associated with virtual learning platforms were not frequently identified as factors contributing to participants' decisions to withdraw. The findings of this study suggest that a more comprehensive understanding of withdrawal in distance higher education requires an examination that extends beyond the modality itself. It is imperative to consider the broader economic, employment-related, personal,

academic, vocational, and institutional circumstances that shape students' educational trajectories.

A salient finding of the study was that withdrawal did not necessarily signify disengagement from higher education. Most survey respondents (77.3%) indicated that they would consider returning to the same university. However, subsequent interviews revealed that future educational plans were frequently contingent on changes in financial, employment, or personal circumstances. For some participants, withdrawal therefore represented a potentially temporary interruption, whereas for others, such as the participant who identified a vocational mismatch, it involved a redirection of their educational trajectory.

The findings of this study have practical implications for the retention of students in distance programs. Institutional strategies may benefit from moving beyond approaches focused primarily on students' adaptation to online learning and considering mechanisms that respond to the circumstances identified in this study. These include financial pressures, competing employment demands, time constraints, and awareness of and access to institutional support. The early identification of students experiencing multiple pressures has the potential to inform the development of more responsive and context-sensitive retention strategies.

However, it is imperative to interpret the findings considering the study's limitations, particularly the small quantitative sample and the limited number of qualitative interviews. The results are therefore context-specific and should not be generalized to all distance education students. Future research could examine these relationships with larger and more diverse samples and explore longitudinally how economic, employment-related, institutional, and personal circumstances interact over time in students' decisions to persist, interrupt, or resume their studies.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to this research.

Author Contributions

Blanca Lucia Cely Betancourt: formal analysis, review and editing of the manuscript.

Juan Daniel Martínez Quimbayo: Conceptualization, methodology, research, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, drafting of the original manuscript.

Danna Camila Chaparro Espitia: Conceptualization, methodology, research, data curation, formal analysis, visualization, drafting of the original manuscript.

Declaration of Use of AI

The authors declare that they used artificial intelligence tools specifically DeepL Write, Grammarly, and ChatGPT only as an aid during the process of linguistic review and improvement of the manuscript's writing. These tools were used to review aspects related to clarity, grammar, style, and academic expression. They were not used for data collection, analysis of results, or the formulation of the study's conclusions. All conceptual, methodological, analytical, and interpretive decisions were made by the authors, who reviewed and validated the final content and assumed full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript.

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