EDU**XX1**

Influence of academic expectations on reasons for dropout intentions among students at an ecuadorian university

Influencia de las expectativas académicas sobre los motivos de intención de abandono en estudiantes de una universidad ecuatoriana

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ABSTRACT

Academic expectations are defined as predictions made by individuals concerning their performance in contextualised scenarios, such as those found within educational settings. A discrepancy between these expectations and their actual experiences during their university education has been associated with intention to dropout. The aim of this research is to determine the influence of academic expectations on the reasons for the intention to drop out of studies, and previously to determine whether on these expectations are influenced by career choice and parents' level of education. The study used a quantitative and explanatory research approach, where 601 students from four field of knowledge in an Ecuadorian public university were selected by a stratified probabilistic method. The Academic Expectations Questionnaire and the Reasons to Drop Out Intentions scale were used to gather data. The data were analysed with descriptive statistics and structural equations using the Robust Weighted Least Squares estimator. The findings indicated that career options exert influence on three dimensions: personal and social development, social pressure and political and citizenship involvement. Additionally, the paternal educational attainment was found to be a significant predictor of heightened expectations concerning political and citizenship involvement, while the maternal educational attainment was found to be a significant predictor of elevated expectations in social interactions. The findings further demonstrate that political and citizenship involvement expectations primarily influence intentions to drop out, particularly in terms of organisation, life management and professional aspects. In conclusion, both career choice and parental educational level exert a significant influence on academic expectations, although in distinct ways and to varying degrees. While political involvement and citizenship have been identified as the most significant factors influencing academic expectations, it is important to note that these factors exert a differentiated influence on individuals' career intentions to dropout.

Keywords: academic expectations, dropout, higher education, career choice, university students

RESUMEN

Las expectativas académicas son predicciones que hacen las personas sobre su actuación en situaciones contextualizadas, como el entorno educativo. Una discrepancia entre estas expectativas y lo que encuentran realmente en la universidad, podría contribuir a la intención de abandono de los estudios. El objetivo principal del trabajo es determinar la influencia de las expectativas académicas sobre los motivos de intención de abandono y, previamente, si sobre estas expectativas influyen la opción de carrera y el nivel educativo de los progenitores. El estudio es de tipo cuantitativo explicativo, en el que participaron 601 estudiantes de las cuatro ramas de conocimiento de una universidad pública ecuatoriana seleccionados mediante muestreo probabilístico estratificado. Para la obtención de información se utilizaron el cuestionario de Expectativas Académicas y la Escala de Motivos de Intención de Abandono. Los datos se analizaron con estadística descriptiva

y ecuaciones estructurales empleando el estimador Mínimos Cuadrados Ponderados Robustos. Los resultados revelan que la opción de carrera impacta en las dimensiones de desarrollo personal y social, presión social e implicación política y ciudadanía. Además, un mayor nivel educativo paterno determina mayores expectativas en la implicación política y ciudadanía; mientras que un mayor nivel educativo materno determina mayores expectativas en la interacción social. Las expectativas sobre la implicación política y ciudadanía influyen principalmente en los motivos de intención de abandono relacionados con la organización, la LIFEMión de vida y los aspectos profesionales. En conclusión, tanto la opción de carrera como el nivel educativo de los progenitores influyen en las expectativas académicas, pero de manera diferente y con intensidad variable. En cuanto a las expectativas académicas, aunque la influencia más notoria recaiga en la implicación política y ciudadanía, se puede concluir que estas tienen una influencia diferenciada sobre los motivos de intención de abandono de la carrera.

Palabras clave: expectativas académicas, abandono de estudios, educación superior, elección de profesión, estudiantes universitarios

INTRODUCTION

The high demand for university access has, in recent decades, become a common feature across all higher education systems. In the specific case of Latin America and the Caribbean, this demand has a particular interpretation, as it is an indicator of the great economic and social value that higher education represents for both individuals and the state (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] and Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2022).

According to UNESCO and ECLAC (2022), the expansion of higher education in the region is globally significant, but it shows substantial differences and an uneven pace among countries. At the same time, it reveals a considerable increase in access gaps and disparities in the expansion of higher education. The UNESCO regional report highlights that opportunities for access and success in higher education are shaped much earlier and are determined by the quality of primary and secondary education systems, as well as by social and economic factors.

Therefore, access to and persistence in higher education do not depend solely on individual merit, talent, or dedication.

Seminara (2021) indicates that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Latin America already had high dropout and grade repetition rates, along with low graduation rates in higher education, with marked differences among various socioeconomic groups. Although government policies attempt to mitigate the gaps in persistence and graduation, university dropout rates remain a global concern (Gutiérrez et al., 2021). In the Latin American region, the dropout problem has

prompted reflection on the effectiveness of educational policies implemented since the expansion of coverage (Urbina & Ovalles, 2016). In Ecuador, the regulations support a high-quality and excellent higher education system that prioritizes principles such as interculturality, universal access, retention, mobility, and non-discriminatory graduation, along with free tuition in public institutions (Organic Law of Higher Education [LOES], 2018). Nevertheless, data from the Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (Senescyt) reveal a different reality. The gross university enrollment rate stood at 39.56% in 2021 and 40.88% in 2022. Regarding access, there is a significant gap between the number of enrolled students and the available seats. For example, in the second period of 2022, there were 270,745 enrolled applicants and only 129,583 seats offered in public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In 2021, 35,910 people graduated from higher education (Senescyt, 2023), and the dropout rate in public universities reached 18.35% (Senescyt, 2024).

In this context, the university represents an opportunity for improved quality of life and social mobility for students. However, dropout rates indicate that access, persistence, and graduation are influenced by several limiting factors. Among these are academic expectations, which are anticipations of what will occur during university life. This anticipation may influence students' reasons for intending to drop out, which can vary in nature and may ultimately lead to actual dropout.

Given this situation, it is appropriate to approach the issue from the students' perspective. This approach will allow for the exploration of the influence of two factors (career choice and parents' educational level) on students' academic expectations and how these expectations affect their intention to drop out of university. The resulting information will be useful for designing institutional strategies that support student retention. Developing such measures is essential, as both gross enrollment rates and terminal efficiency indicators are key elements in measuring the educational quality of HEIs (UNESCO & ECLAC, 2022).

Academic Expectations

Adaptation and academic progress at the university level are complex, multidimensional processes involving both interpersonal and contextual factors (Esteban et al., 2017). Furthermore, the universalization of access to higher education has transformed university classrooms, resulting in greater diversity in students' personal, familial, social, and academic backgrounds. This diversity implies that students' academic expectations regarding their performance and university trajectory can also vary considerably. University life carries high expectations for academic challenges, which is why the literature pays special attention to academic

expectations, especially during the early years of study (Besa-Gutiérrez & Gil-Flores, 2021; Gomes & Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2018).

Students begin their university studies with expectations that are often influenced by fantasy and idealization. Expectations are what we anticipate will happen, which means the actions we choose and our responses to new experiences are not random. Rather, they are connected to an internal accumulation of knowledge and beliefs we have formed throughout life (Howard, 2005). Gomes and Soares (2013) define expectations as predictions people make about their performance with the goal of satisfying their own needs and those of others in specific contexts.

Kuh et al. (2005) propose two perspectives on expectations. The first sees them as a filter, a selection mechanism through which students evaluate and make sense of the information presented to them, as well as their experiences inside and outside the classroom. The second perspective views expectations as a psychological catalyst that can dissuade certain behaviours, thereby shaping experiences. These authors draw on self-efficacy theory, expectancy theory, and motivation theory to explain how expectations influence students' decisions, time management at university, and overall performance both in and outside the classroom.

This study adopts the classification of academic expectations proposed by Deaño et al. (2015):

a) Personal and social development, which reflects expectations focused on personal growth through academic experiences and includes elements such as autonomy, self-confidence, and critical thinking.

b) Student mobility, related to students' willingness to participate in international exchange programs.

c) Political involvement and citizenship, which reflects students' desire to engage in discussions about political, economic, and social issues.

d) Social pressure, which captures students' desire to meet external expectations (from family, peers, or professors).

e) Social interaction, referring to expectations of engaging in social activities outside regular class hours and interacting with peers.

f) Training for employment, referring to expectations regarding the training conditions that lead to better employment opportunities or smoother entry into the labor market.

Factors influencing academic expectations

Considering that academic expectations are based on prior knowledge and experiences; it is to be expected that the factors influencing their formation are diverse. This study focuses on two: career choice and the educational level of parents.

In Ecuador, the university admission process seeks to ensure equal opportunities for applicants, as reflected in the implementation of mechanisms to evaluate students and allocate placements. However, this process has faced criticism, as it has prevented many students from gaining access to their preferred degree programs (Guerrero et al., 2018). Thus, career choice refers to whether a student is enrolled in their preferred program or in one that was their second or third option.

Moreno and Soares (2014) assert that students' expectations depend on the career choice they make. When they are unable to access their preferred program, they opt for related degrees that might allow them to enter their desired field in the future. Expectations regarding interpersonal relationships are also determined by satisfaction with and adaptation to the chosen field of study and institution (Soares et al., 2018). Wang and Houston (2023) emphasize the influence of preconceived ideas, expectations, and values on students' identity and views of their future profession. Generally, when the chosen career path aligns with students' vocational interests, academic success is more likely (Almeida et al., 2004).

Parents' educational level is also a significant factor in students' expectations and success at university. Mishra (2020) states that parents' educational qualifications are closely linked to their children's enrollment in and completion of higher education. Parents' academic achievements constitute a form of social capital related to information—students benefit from their parents' personal experiences and knowledge. However, a low level of parental education does not prevent the development of expectations related to pursuing a university degree. In fact, parents with limited formal education may still hope their children will attain a better quality of life through a university profession (Hernández & Padilla et al., 2019).

According to Bernal et al. (2023), academic expectations tend to be lower when parents have low levels of education. Moreover, the influence of parental education on expectations varies for instance, the mother's education level positively predicts students' expectations regarding social interaction, while the father's education level negatively predicts expectations related to training for employment and political involvement and citizenship (Alfonso Gil et al., 2014).

López-Aguilar et al. (2022) suggest that universities should make concerted efforts to ensure that students are well-guided, capable of making informed decisions, and, ultimately, able to establish clear expectations and build future projects on solid foundations.

Academic Expectations and Reasons for Intent to Drop Out

Before addressing the relationship between these two variables, it is important to clarify that the intent to drop out is conceived as a cognitive process in which

students consider the possibility of leaving their studies, even though this has not yet materialized and, therefore, can be reversed. It refers to a situation in which students have not yet made the decision to withdraw from their degree program but express the intention to do so. Hence, it is essential to distinguish between dropout as a decision-making process and dropout as the actual outcome of that decision (Cervero, 2020).

The intent to drop out can be explained by a wide range of factors that vary considerably. While Palacio et al. (2020) propose socioeconomic, academic, psychological, or demographic factors, Olmos and Garín (2022) suggest that dropout intentions are associated with personal challenges, family circumstances, social relationships, institutional characteristics, and structural factors.

These variables are reflected in the model proposed by Ambiel (2015), which classifies the reasons for dropout intentions. The first component, institutional reasons, includes aspects related to the quality of teaching staff, services, or infrastructure. The second, personal reasons, includes issues related to career choice and family matters. The third, reasons related to lack of support, involves situations that hinder academic persistence, mainly due to the lack of financial resources. The fourth, career-related reasons, encompasses concerns about future professional activities and labor market conditions. The fifth, academic performance-related reasons, refers to difficulties in students' academic performance. The sixth, interpersonal reasons, addresses problems or challenges in relationships with peers. Lastly, the seventh component, reasons related to autonomy, is associated with the challenges of living away from home while studying. Based on this classification, Ferreira et al. (2019) adapted these components into four dimensions: organizational, life management, professional, and relational.

The close connection between academic expectations and dropout intention is noted in studies such as that of Elías (2008), who proposes typologies of dropout motives that include, among other variables, students' motivations and expectations. In fact, Elías explicitly states that false expectations are one of the reasons for dropout, encompassing students who were unclear about what they wanted to study or whose expectations did not match what they encountered in their degree programs. More specific findings link students' expectations with definitive or permanent dropout, suggesting that some students leave or change degrees because their academic program does not meet their expected career or financial outcomes (Canales & Ríos, 2007).

Aina et al. (2022) found that the risk of dropping out increases when students' high expectations for university performance are not met. According to Suberviola et al. (2024), functional expectations and effort expectations have the strongest influence on dropout intentions, as students who fail to envision a better future or sufficient recognition are more likely to drop out.

Bernardo et al. (2018) demonstrate that individual commitment, the strength of expectations, institutional support, and a sense of community are predictors of students' persistence in their studies. Consequently, academic expectations emerge as one of the most important variables for predicting dropout intent, highlighting the need to better manage expectations as a protective factor against dropping out (Galve-González et al., 2022).

Casanova et al. (2018) argue that the presence of dropout intentions raises questions about students' transition and adaptation processes, showing that many students enter university without a clear personal or professional project, without having explored other options, or because they were admitted into programs that did not match their preferences due to university admission systems and rules. In any case, understanding students' intention to drop out can provide greater insight into the overall dropout process (Bean, 1982), especially when considering the individual and institutional consequences of dropping out, which makes preventing it imperative (Bernardo et al., 2018).

Given the variables discussed and the findings of previous studies, a theoretical model of causal relationships was proposed, including the following variables: career choice, parents' educational level, academic expectations, and reasons for intent to drop out. Academic expectations are influenced by both career choice and parental education.

This study aims to test the fit of this theoretical model through the following objectives:

a) To determine the influence of students' chosen field of study and parents' educational level on university students' academic expectations; and

b) To examine the influence of academic expectations on the reasons for intent to drop out of university.

Based on these objectives, the following hypotheses were proposed: H1: Students' chosen field of study influences their academic expectations. H2: Parents' educational level influences students' academic expectations. H3: Academic expectations influence the reasons for intent to drop out of university studies.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study was conducted using a quantitative approach, with a non-experimental design and an explanatory scope, involving measurements from a single group. The research was carried out at the University of Cuenca, a public, secular, and non-profit institution in Ecuador. The university has 12 faculties and

is the first in Ecuador to offer degrees across all fields of knowledge. Its academic offerings include master's degrees, specializations, and doctoral programs (Universidad de Cuenca, 2024).

Participants

At the time of data collection, the population consisted of 14,576 enrolled undergraduate students across the university's 12 faculties, grouped into four fields of knowledge. To determine the sample size, Cochran's formula (1977), adjusted for finite populations, was used with a 98% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The recommended sample size was 524 students. An additional 21% was added to compensate for potential data loss, resulting in a total of 635 students invited to participate.

A stratified probabilistic sampling method with proportional allocation was used. The four strata corresponded to the academic fields. Table 1 shows the strata, invited and final sample sizes, and their respective proportions. After data collection, 34 incomplete questionnaires were excluded, resulting in a valid final sample of 601 students. Variations in the relative proportions of the strata were considered when interpreting the results.

Table 1

Sample Size Distribution by Stratum

Stratum	Population Proportion (%)	Invited sample	Final Sample	Final Sample Proportion (%)
Social Sciences, Journalism, Information, Law, Administration &Services	25.8	164	120	20
Education, Arts & Humanities	17.0	108	121	20.1
Engineering, Technology, Architecture & Agricultural Sciences	29.9	190	97	16.1
Health & Wellbeing	27.3	173	263	43.8
Total	100	635	601	100

Inclusion criteria were: (1) being enrolled in any undergraduate degree program from the second to the final semester, and (2) having signed the informed consent form. Once institutional permission was granted, the questionnaire link was emailed to students. Prior to answering the questionnaire, participants signed the informed consent form. Data collection was carried out via the QuestionPro platform between September 2022 and February 2023. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oviedo.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 39, with a mean of 21.07 years (SD = 2.55). Of the sample, 31.4% were male, 67.6% female, and 1% did not respond. 38.8% had taken the university entrance exam more than once, and 57.4% had taken additional preparatory courses for the exam.

Instruments

A form was used to collect sociodemographic data, including gender, age, career choice, and parents' educational level. Career choice was categorized into three levels (first, second, and third choice), and parental education was coded from an open-ended question.

For the variable academic expectations, the short version of the Academic Perceptions Questionnaire (APQ) (Casanova et al., 2019) was used. It assesses university students' perceptions of academic expectations and contains 24 items across six dimensions: Personal and social development (PSD), Student mobility (MOB), Political involvement and citizenship (PIC), Social pressure (SOP), Social interaction (SOI), Training for employment (EMP).

Responses were rated using a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The second instrument was the Reasons for Higher Education Dropout Scale (Reasons Dropout) (Ferreira et al., 2019), organized into four dimensions: Organizational (ORG), Life management (LIFEM), Professional (PROF), Relational (RELA).

The 30 items reflect reasons that influence students' decisions to leave their studies. Responses were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = very weak, 6 = very strong).

The internal consistency of both instruments was adequate, as shown by Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω coefficients (Table 2). Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed good model fit indices for both instruments (Table 3).

Table 2

Reliability of the Instruments Used

Instrument	α	ω
Academic Expectations Questionnaire		
Personal and Social Development	.889	.889
Student Mobility	.707	.663
Political Involvement and Citizenship	.863	.858
Social Pressure	.825	.834
Social Interaction	.839	.834
Job Training	.874	.875
Reasons for Higher Education Dropout Scale		
Organizational	.797	.799
Life Management	.814	.815
Professional	.888	.894
Relational	.803	.805

Table 3

Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Questionnaire

Instrument	χ^2 (gl)	RMSEA [90% IC]	SRMR	CFI	TLI
APQ	468.882 (215)	0.054[0.048 0.061]	0.049	0.987	0.985
Reasons Dropout	1064.378 (399)	0.064[0.060 0.069]	0.073	0.964	0.961

Note: APQ = Academic Expectations Questionnaire; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index.

Data Analysis

In the first stage, the structure and psychometric properties of the instruments were analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in RStudio, with the Lavaan

package (Rosseel, 2012; Rosseel et al., 2022). Since the items were ordinal, the Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) estimation method was applied. Robust indices (Padgett & Morgan, 2021) and the criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2014) for large samples (n > 250) were used to assess model fit, with the following indicators: Chi-square (χ²; p < .05), Comparative Fit Index (CFI ≥ .90), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI ≥ .90), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < .08),Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR < .08). Reliability was reported using the SemTools package, which calculated Cronbach's Alpha and McDonald's Omega.

For qualitative variables, relative frequencies were used. For quantitative variables, medians and quintiles were calculated. Non-normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test (p < .05). Inferential analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) via the Weighted Least Squares Mean and Variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimation method, which is appropriate for non-normal variables and is a robust variation of DWLS (Kline, 2023). This allowed the identification and confirmation of relationships among the variables studied. Model fit was evaluated using criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999).

Data processing and analysis were performed in RStudio using the Lavaan package, and visualizations were created with Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

This section presents the descriptive analyses of each dimension of the instruments used, as well as values related to career choice and parental education level.

Regarding academic expectations, students report higher expectations concerning the training for employment they will receive throughout their studies, followed by personal and social development, political involvement and citizenship, and social pressure. Below these are expectations related to social interaction, with student mobility expectations ranking the lowest (Table 4).

Table 4

Descriptive statistics of academic expectations by dimension

Dimension	Min.	Max	Median	Q1	Q3
Personal and Social Development	1.25	6	4.75	4.00	5.50
Student Mobility	1	6	3.50	3.00	4.25
Political Implication & Citizenship	1.75	6	4.75	4.00	5.50
Social Preasure	1	6	4.75	3.75	5.25
Social Interaction	1	6	4.25	3.25	5.00
Trainnig for Employment	1	6	5.00	4.25	5.75

Regarding the reasons for the intention to drop out, the most significant are found in the professional, life management, and organizational dimensions. The least influential reasons are in the relational dimension (Table 5).

Table 5

Descriptive statistics of reasons for the intention to drop out by dimension

Dimension	Min	Max	Median	Q1	Q3
Organizational	1.00	5.00	3.00	2.38	3.38
Life Management	1.00	5.00	3.29	2.57	3.86
Professional	1.00	5.00	3.25	2.50	3.88
Relational	1.00	5.00	2.43	1.86	3.00

Table 6 shows results related to career choice, which was regrouped into two categories (the third option was grouped with the second due to low frequency). It's worth noting that students had the possibility to apply to three degree programs, and based on their entrance exam scores, they were assigned one. Most students (62.1%) reported that they are currently studying their first-choice program. More than one-third are studying a second- or third-choice program.

Table 6

Frequency of career choice reported by participating students

Career Choice	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %
First choice	373	62.1	62.1
Second or third choice	228	37.9	37.9
Total	601	100	100

As for parental educational level, the distribution is similar among fathers, with roughly one- third having completed primary school, high school, or university. For mothers, the high school level shows a slightly higher percentage (38.4%), while primary and university levels are around 30% and 31%, respectively.

Table 7

Frequencies of parental education levels

Father's Education Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %
Primary	196	32.6	33.1
High School	197	32.8	33.3
University	199	33.1	33.6
Total (valid)	592	98.5	100
Missing	9	1.5	
Total	601	100.	
Mother's Education Level	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Valid %**
Primary	179	29.8	29.8
High School	231	38.4	38.4
University	191	31.8	31.8
Total	601	100	100

Explanatory Model Analysis

To determine whether career choice and parents' educational level influence students' academic expectations, a Structural Equation Model (SEM) was used with the WLSMV estimator.

The first model included linear regressions between career choice and both parents' educational level with the six dimensions of academic expectations. However, the goodness-of-fit indices were not satisfactory. A second model was tested, excluding the student mobility dimension due to its weak contribution to the model. The second model showed improved incremental fit indices and a good overall model fit (Table 8).

Table 8
Goodness-of-fit indices for models

Model	χ2/gl	p-value	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	CFI	TLI
1	22838.303 [348]	0.0000	0.086[0.082 0.090]	0.054	0.942	0.931
2	21038.093 [250]	0.0000	0.069 [0.064 0.074]	0.035	0.972	0.965

The results reveal a significant relationship between choosing the first-choice degree and three dimensions of academic expectations: Personal and Social Development, Social Pressure, Political Involvement and Citizenship. Students enrolled in their first-choice program show higher expectations in these areas.

Additionally, students whose fathers have higher educational levels exhibit higher expectations in the Political Involvement and Citizenship and Social Interaction dimensions. Students with more highly educated mothers showed higher expectations only in Social Interaction, and indirectly in Training for Employment.

However, neither career choice nor parental education level were significant predictors of expectations related to training for employment (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Final model with standardized coefficients
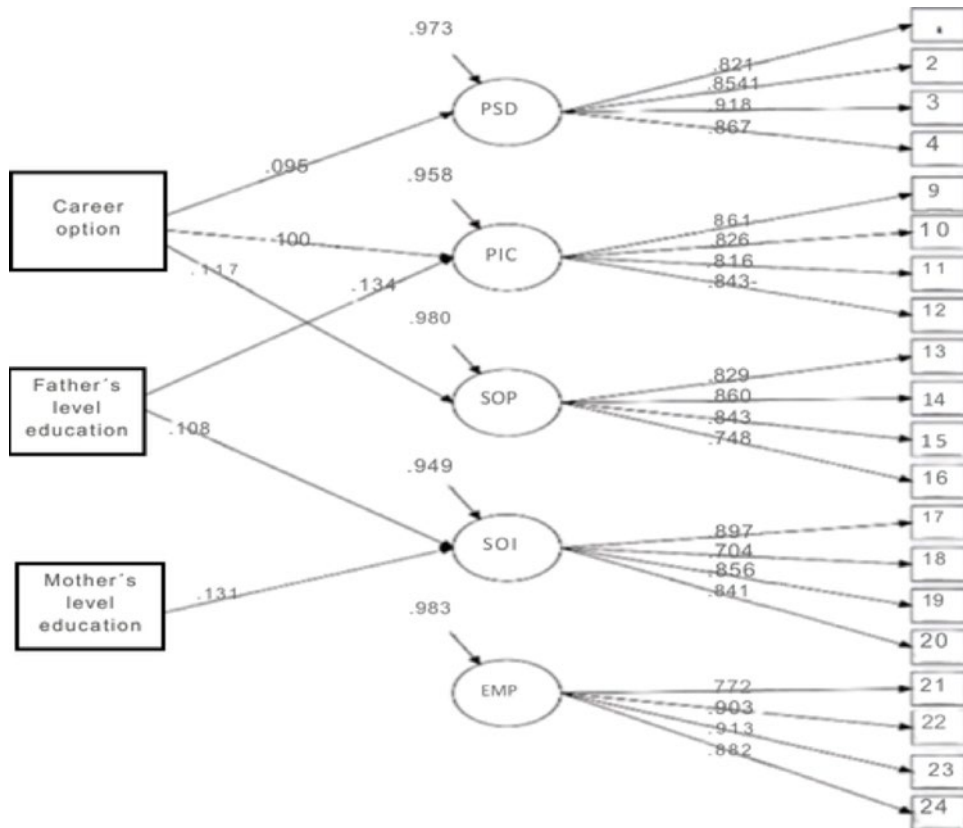
Note: The presented model is oblique, not orthogonal. In the figure, error covariances between latent variables are excluded to facilitate graphical interpretation. Numbers 1–24 correspond to the items of the CEA questionnaire.

Two models were tested to examine the influence of academic expectations on the intention to drop out. The first model included all dimensions of academic expectations; however, both the fit indices and the baseline model did not adequately fit the data (χ^2 = 333,867.788, df = 1,432, p < .0000). Therefore, a second model was tested excluding the "student mobility" dimension, and the results showed an acceptable model fit. The chi-square test for the baseline model was significant (χ^2 = 32,340.243, df = 1,225, p < .0000) (Table 9).

Table 9
Model Fit Indices

Model	χ2/gl	p	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	CFI	TLI
1	5233.080 [1349]	0.0000	0.069[0.067 0.071]	0.087	0.880	0.873
2	2995.118 [1149]	0.0000	0.052[0.049 0.054]	0.059	0.941	0.937

Figure 2 shows that academic expectations related to *political engagement and citizenship* have a notable influence, with a standardized coefficient of .310, on dropout intention related to *organizational*, *life management*, and *professional* issues.

The model suggests that academic expectations around *personal and social development* act as a protective factor (−.295). Thus, if students have high expectations regarding the development of their potential, personality, and autonomy, they are less likely to consider dropping out due to organizational, life management, or professional reasons. The same dimension also acts as a buffer against *relational* dropout motives: when expectations for personal and social development are high, factors such as living alone, having peers with different ways of thinking, or coming from different social backgrounds are less likely to be perceived as reasons to drop out.

Expectations regarding *training for employment* can serve as both a risk and a protective factor, although with relatively low coefficients. It acts as a risk factor (.162) in that high expectations for job-related training are associated with dropout intentions related to organizational and life management challenges. However, there is also an inverse relationship with professional dropout motives (−.133), indicating a potential protective role in that dimension.

A noteworthy feature of the second model is that the *relational* dimension of the dropout intention scale appears as a separate variable from the other three. This dimension assesses whether living alone, failing to make friends, or belonging to a different social class than peers could be motives for leaving university. Its separation in the model does not imply it is an irrelevant factor; on the contrary, it underscores the importance of addressing it in greater depth, as the relational dimension involves other key elements that are critical for academic success.

Figure 2

Final model with standardized coefficients
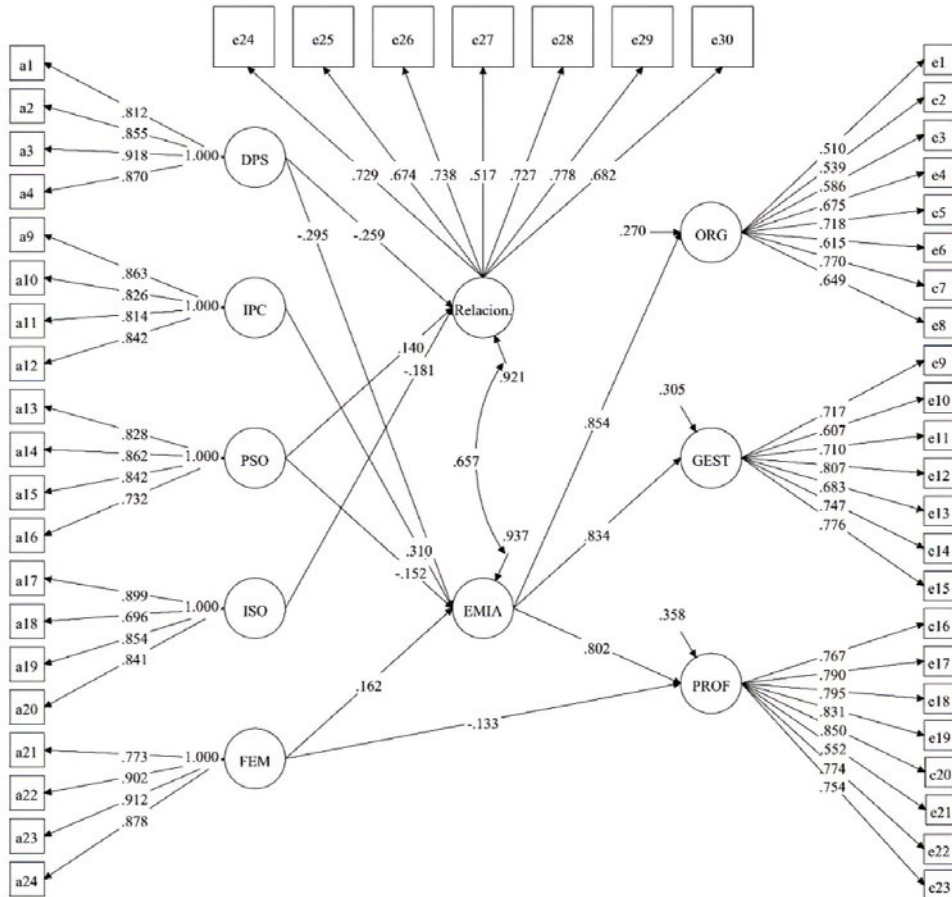
Note 1: The presented model is oblique, not orthogonal. Error covariances between latent variables are excluded from the figure to facilitate graphical interpretation.

Note 2: Personal and Social Development = PSD; Political Involvement and Citizenship = PIC; Social Pressure = SOP; Social Interaction = SOI; Training for Employment = EMP. Organizational Dimension = ORG; Life Management Dimension = LIFEM; Professional Dimension = PROF; Relational Dimension = RELA. Labels a1–a24 correspond to items from the APQ questionnaire, and labels e1–e30 correspond to items from the Reasons Dropout questionnaire.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study addressed three hypotheses: the first regarding the influence of career choice on academic expectations; the second regarding the influence of parents' educational level on academic expectations; and the third examining the influence of academic expectations on dropout intentions.

Regarding the first hypothesis, the results confirm that career choice influences students' academic expectations related to personal and social development, political engagement and citizenship, and social pressure. As Peña-Vázquez et al. (2023) mention, studying the desired career could be considered the first expectation fulfilled by university students. Those studying the career that was their first choice generally report high expectations regarding social pressure, meaning students expect to meet the expectations of their families or those who support their education and expect to achieve educational levels similar to or higher than those of their parents. This impact could be explained by the expectations and motivations underlying career choice, as suggested by Boado et al. (2011), who argue that these decisions are strongly influenced by the desire to satisfy family or close environment expectations.

The results highlight that students pursuing their preferred career have higher expectations for political engagement and citizenship, as well as for personal and social development. These high expectations could be due to the students' perception that university represents an opportunity to develop key personal aspects such as identity and autonomy. Furthermore, they expect their education to address social issues, providing them with a broader and more critical view of society (Besa-Gutiérrez, 2020).

In the evaluated model, career choice does not influence expectations related to employment training or social interaction. Descriptive results show that employment training is a highly valued dimension by students, who expect the university to provide them with skills to access better job opportunities, aligning with Alfonso Gil et al. (2013). On the other hand, Soares et al. (2018) suggest that expectations about interpersonal relationships are partly determined by the chosen career, although this influence was not observed in this study.

It is also found that parents' educational level influences students' academic expectations, but not in the same dimensions or with the same intensity. A higher paternal education level influences higher expectations in political engagement and citizenship and social interaction. However, Bernal et al. (2023) suggest that, regardless of parents' educational level, there are no differences in this dimension, while Alfonso Gil et al. (2014) highlight the influence of paternal education on this dimension. Additionally, a higher maternal education level determines higher

academic expectations for social interaction and, indirectly, for employment training, agreeing with Alfonso Gil et al. (2014).

The results conclude, in line with Bernal et al. (2023) and Alfonso Gil et al. (2014), that parents' educational level is a determining factor in what students expect from university and their education. The influence of parents' educational level plays a relevant role in shaping students' academic expectations, as confirmed by Tinto (1975), who explains that students from families with higher education levels are more likely to remain in university. On the other hand, difficulties in adapting to academic habits become more complex when students do not have parents or friends with similar experiences (Aina et al., 2022).

Overall, the academic expectations of the participating students suggest that they seek a university space to develop personal, professional, and civic responsibilities, in line with Gorgodze et al. (2020), who found that students expect the university to focus on skill development and knowledge transfer. Regarding the third hypothesis, the discussion of the results highlights the significant influence of academic expectations on dropout intentions. However, it is important to note that this influence is heterogeneous, as academic expectations interdependently influence different dropout motives with

varying directions and intensity.

Unlike the findings of Alfonso Gil et al. (2013), who show that academic expectations regarding political engagement and citizenship are of lower importance to students, this study demonstrates that political engagement and citizenship notably influence dropout motives related to organizational issues, life management, and professional concerns. This influence can be explained by one perspective on higher education in Latin America, which emphasizes the importance of a more critical and committed education, whose benefits extend to both society and the labor market, as well as personal development (Veugelers et al., 2014). It is likely that attitudes related to education emphasizing responsibility, self-responsibility, and the ethical generation of knowledge (Benjumea & Mesa, 2021) have resonated with the expectations of the participating students.

The set of academic expectations related to personal and social development includes autonomy, self-confidence, critical thinking, and personal improvement (Deaño et al., 2015). According to the results of this study, expectations about personal and social development act as a protective factor against dropout motives, as students would consider fewer reasons for leaving their studies when these expectations are high. These findings partially align with the conclusion of López-Aguilar et al. (2023), which highlights that students with low confidence and a lack of control over their projects are more likely to drop out of their studies.

Preliminary results in this study, showing that expectations about employment training are highly valued by students, are similar to those of Cervero et al. (2021),

who concluded that students' interest in knowledge acquired for their future professional careers influences their decision to remain in university, and those of Alfonso Gil et al. (2013), who found that students expect a lot from employment training.

On the other hand, academic expectations regarding social interaction and social pressure have a low influence on dropout motives related to relational issues. However, it is important to note that high expectations regarding social pressure lead students to consider more reasons for abandoning their studies, while high expectations regarding social interaction reduce the likelihood of dropping

out for relational reasons. Nevertheless, it should be considered that social interaction is an extremely broad construct, which, as noted by other studies, includes individual factors such as personality traits and social class (Vargas et al., 2019). Despite the limited influence of expectations related to social interaction on dropout intentions, it is worth considering that social integration in university plays a buffering role for other variables influencing dropout (Tuero et al., 2018).

Considering the importance of academic expectations in understanding dropout intentions (Galve- González et al., 2022), and the results presented, it is essential to highlight the practical implications of this work. Understanding students' expectations should lead to strengthening orientation programs, both before and during the university admission process, so that the academic expectations students bring with them to university and their development throughout their education reasonably align with what the university and the labor market offer. There should be a stronger focus on training in political engagement and citizenship, as well as personal and social development, so that students solidify the idea that social commitment is not detached from rigorous academic and professional training.

It is important to note that intervention strategies cannot address all the reasons behind dropout intentions. However, Palacio et al. (2020) emphasize that academic conditions are the sole responsibility of universities, which could mitigate this issue by implementing programs and actions aligned with appropriate state policies.

Lastly, it was deemed appropriate to discuss why academic expectations regarding student mobility have not been considered in the previous models. The University of Cuenca has implemented internationalization strategies aimed at increasing student mobility to study at regional or foreign universities (Humala, 2024). In the participating sample, student mobility is seen as a possibility, but no concrete actions are envisioned to materialize this expectation. This may be due to the fact that student mobility in Ecuador and Latin America depends on educational, economic, political-cultural, and language factors.

Moreover, internationalization policies do not depend solely on institutional efforts; they require agreements for regional integration in higher education (Fairlie Reinoso, 2021). Scholarships for student mobility are a valid institutional strategy

to promote academic exchange. However, Camacho (2017) warns that the absence of alternative financing systems or the lack of expanding existing opportunities can lead to the passive exclusion of students who do not have personal funds to participate in international mobility activities.

Future Lines and Limitations

It seems pertinent to deepen the exploration of the relationships between academic expectations and dropout intentions in Ecuadorian universities, particularly in light of the changes in the university access process since 2023 (Agreement No. SENESCYT-2022-043, Senescyt, 2022). These changes include a differentiated mechanism for career selection and seat allocation, which may have important implications for students' expectations and their eventual intentions to abandon their studies. Further research could investigate how these new policies impact students' perceptions and decisions throughout their academic journey.

Moreover, expanding the study of academic expectations in different local and regional contexts would provide valuable insights into the variation of expectations and dropout intentions based on socio-cultural or institutional factors. Investigating academic expectations in universities with differing socio-economic, cultural, and academic realities could yield important comparative data, particularly with respect to different regions in Ecuador.

Consolidating policies and strategies related to student mobility could also constitute a relevant future line of research. Understanding how student mobility influences academic expectations, retention, and dropout rates is particularly timely, as international exchange programs and global learning opportunities continue to shape higher education. Exploring how these programs intersect with students' motivations and career expectations would contribute significantly to this area of study.

Future studies could include additional mediating variables that were not considered in the current research, such as academic performance, students' university entrance grades, and their previous academic trajectory. These factors may play a pivotal role in shaping students' academic expectations and dropout intentions. Additionally, incorporating data from other universities in Ecuador with different realities would help provide a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding of these dynamics.

Finally, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution. While a stratified random sample was designed, certain strata were overrepresented due to an unequal response rate. This limitation prevented the inclusion of academic field as a predictor variable for academic expectations, despite its inclusion in previous

studies. Future research should strive to address this limitation by ensuring a more balanced representation across different academic fields, which could reveal how students' expectations vary depending on their field of study.

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