

WHEN BEING AT UNIVERSITY (ALSO) MEANS LEAVING HOME: CAN FAMILY SUPPORT MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO DROPOUT INTENTIONS?

Teresa Mendes¹, Bárbara Gonzalez^{1,2}, Sara Albuquerque^{1,3},
Sónia Correia⁴, & Paula Paulino^{1,2}

¹HEI-Lab - Digital Human Environment Interaction Lab, Lusófona University (Portugal)

²CICPSI, Faculty of Psychology of the University of Lisbon (Portugal)

³CINEICC, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Coimbra (Portugal)

⁴CIDEFES - Centro de Investigação em Desporto, Educação Física, Exercício e Saúde,
Lusófona University (Portugal)

Abstract

Dropout is a major concern in higher education (HE) across countries, with long-lasting consequences. Previous research has shown that undergraduate students living away from home may be at higher risk of dropping out of HE, comparatively to those that keep living with their families, but results have been inconsistent. Moving away from home, living and studying independently are major steps for young people. While studying outside family homes may give HE students greater opportunities to exercise autonomy, it also brings added challenges that may interfere with students' academic adaptation, and lead to dropout. One factor for optimum academic integration may be the support students receive from their families. This study aimed to: (1) compare students away from home with students living with their families in their levels of dropout intentions (DOI), and in a set of variables potentially related to dropout; (2) identify predictors of DOI and (3) examine the moderating role of perceived family support on the links between specific predictors and DOI. A stratified sample of 584 Portuguese undergraduate students aged <23 years (mean age = 20.18, *SD* = 1.3), selected through a convenience quota method, was assessed for psychological, academic and economic variables through self-report instruments. Descriptive, (M)ANOVA, regression and moderation analyses were conducted. The findings showed that students away from home (*n* = 300; 51.4%) presented higher levels of dropout intentions, academic exhaustion, vocational, and economic difficulties, and lower levels of academic self-efficacy, well-being, perception of course value, and satisfaction with education. Students away from home also perceived higher levels of social support, namely family support. No differences were found in the levels of social connectedness to campus or autonomy difficulties between the two groups. Academic exhaustion, vocational, autonomy difficulties, perception of course value and social connectedness to the campus were significant predictors of DOI, explaining 43% of the variance. Moderation analyses showed that the effects of academic exhaustion, autonomy difficulties and vocational difficulties (the three strongest predictors of DOI) were weakened when students perceived moderate levels of family support (but not for higher levels). Overall, students away from home are at greater risk of emotional, academic and economic difficulties, and should receive differentiated attention from HE institutions. Despite being at distance, families play a protective role in preventing student dropout. Families may need help in providing support that enables their young adult students to thrive on their academic path, while fostering autonomy and competence.

Keywords: Dropout intentions, higher education, emergent adulthood, students living away from home, family support.

1. Introduction

Transition to higher education may be considered a major life event, demanding adjustment to a new reality in the academic, social and financial domains. Being a displaced student requires overcoming greater obstacles, and financial, environmental, and social issues make studying away from home more difficult than students thought it would be (Nghiem et al., 2021). Homesickness and difficulty in making friends can generate stress, anxiety and depression, affecting students' well-being and academic performance (Trieu & Nguyen, 2022). Feelings of loneliness, which can lead to problems as sleeping difficulties, and a progressive disconnection from classmates and the course, can be more evident in

students living away from home (Casanova et al., 2023; Medani et al., 2024). Without adequate levels of autonomy and maturity, these students find it more difficult to manage their responsibilities and daily activities, and also experience isolation or anxiety (Newlon & Lovell, 2017). Finally, the need to establish new households away from the parental home involves considerable costs (Hauschildt, 2024). Although several studies report a higher dropout risk in students living away from home (e.g., Casanova, 2021; Sosu et al., 2019; Toyon, 2024), Cocorada (2021) has not found this result, and further research is needed.

Social support is a relevant feature in higher education, with a positive effect on low dropout intentions, and successful integration (e.g., Lopez-Angulo, 2023). Pertaining specifically to support from families, a cross-cultural study of university students found this support was significantly associated with several components of subjective well-being in all the countries (Brannan et al., 2013). For students living away from home, which have to establish new social relations and friendships, this support may be especially crucial, as availability of family support may also compensate for a lack of social integration at university, one of the important predictors of dropout (Sosu et al., 2019).

2. Objectives

This quantitative cross-sectional study aims at (1) comparing undergraduate students living away from home with students living with their families in their levels of dropout intentions (DOI), and in a set of academic, psychological and economic variables that are potentially related to dropout decision; (2) identifying predictors of DOI and (3) examine the moderating role of perceived family support on the links between specific predictors and DOI.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

584 Portuguese undergraduate students aged <23 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.18$, $SD = 1.3$), 51% feminine, were selected through a convenience quota method, based on a matrix that crosses Sex and Age variables (based on 2021 Census). Being an Erasmus student was an exclusion criterion.

3.2. Instruments

A **Sociodemographic** questionnaire was used to assess characterization variables, namely the residence status (studying away from home or not).

The **Screening instrument for students at-risk of dropping out from HE** (Casanova et al., 2021) was used to assess the Dropout Intention (7 items), Academic Exhaustion (5 items), and Satisfaction with Education (5 items). Each item is answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .87 for the Dropout Intention subscale, .83 for the Academic Exhaustion subscale, and .85 for the Satisfaction with Education subscale.

The **Instrument for Exploring Difficulties in Academic Adaptation** (Casanova & Almeida, 2017) was used to assess 1) Adaptation to the institution, 2) Learning, 3) Interpersonal, 4) Economic, 5) Autonomy, and 6) Vocational. Each type of difficulty is assessed through a single item, and the answers are graded from 1 "no difficulties" to 5 "several difficulties".

The Portuguese version of the **Social Connectedness Scale** (SCS; Lee & Robbins, 1995) was used to assess the social connectedness to the campus. This unidimensional 8-item scale assesses HE students' personal sense of belonging on campus. Students indicate on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). In the current study the Cronbach's alpha was .92.

The Satisfaction with family subscale of the **Social Support Satisfaction Scale** (ESSS; Pais-Ribeiro, 1999) was used to assess satisfaction with social support by the family members. This 3-item subscale is answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha of this subscale was .85.

The 3-item **Emotional wellbeing subscale** of the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2009; Matos et al., 2010) was used to assess well-being. This 3-item scale is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (once or twice in the last month) to 5 (every day). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .90.

The **Academic self-efficacy scale** (Santos et al., 2019) was used to assess academic self-efficacy. This 4-item scale is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .88.

The **Perception of course value in face of personal and future goals scale** (Santos et al., 2019) assesses the degree to which the student perceives the course he is attending as useful and valued. This 3-item

scale is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was .85.

3.3. Procedure

After approval by the Ethics Committee of the Lusófona University, data collection took place via online and telephone. All participants gave informed consent. The telephone data collection was carried out using the CATI system (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing), by experienced interviewers. The online data collection was done through an online survey directly accessed by the participants, who had previously accessed the survey link, through the CAWI system (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing).

4. Results

There are significant differences in all variables between students living away from home and the others, except for social connectedness to the campus, and learning, interpersonal, and autonomy difficulties. Students living away from home present higher dropout intentions ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.13$, $F = 9.853$, $p = .002$). The MANOVA showed significant differences in the composite of Difficulties in academic adaptation (Wilks' Lambda = 0.343, $F(6, 577) = 2.395$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2_{\text{par}} = .024$), and the students living away from home had significantly higher values in the institutional ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.13$, $F = 4.796$, $p = .029$), economic ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.15$, $F = 8.520$, $p = .004$) and vocational difficulties ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.19$, $F = 8.857$, $p = .003$). They also showed higher academic exhaustion ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.98$, $F = 5.991$, $p = .015$), lower well-being ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.03$, $F = 21.744$, $p < .001$), lower academic self-efficacy ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.10$, $F = 8.180$, $p = .004$), lower satisfaction with education ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.92$, $F = 8.396$, $p = .004$) and lower perception of course value ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.03$, $F = 7.303$, $p = .007$). On the opposite direction, students living away from home present more satisfaction with family support ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 0.89$, $F = 17.230$, $p < .001$).

A multiple regression using the enter method showed the model explains 42.9 % of the variance of the dropout intentions of students living away from home ($F(12, 287) = 17.953$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .429$, $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}} = .405$).

Table 1. Multiple regression analysis on variables predicting dropout intentions in students living away from home.

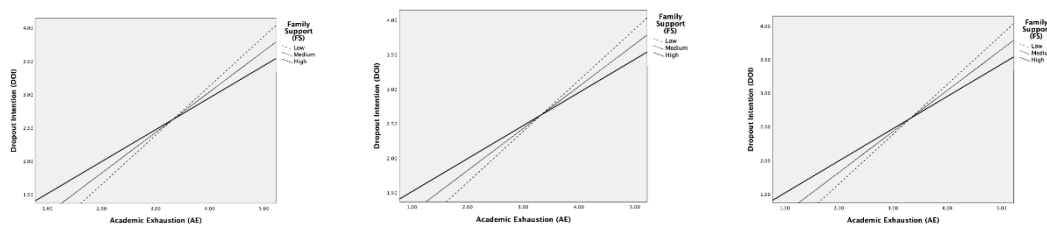
Variable	B	SE	95% CI		β	p
			LL	UP		
Institutional difficulties	-.049	.065	-.177	.080	-.049	.455
Learning difficulties	-.009	.065	-.137	.119	-.008	.890
Interpersonal difficulties	-.018	.064	-.145	.109	-.018	.785
Economic difficulties	-.065	.055	-.173	.044	-.066	.243
Autonomy difficulties	.163	.057	.050	.276	.158	.005
Vocational difficulties	.217	.054	.110	.324	.230	<.001
Social connectedness to the campus	-.134	.053	-.239	-.030	-.146	.012
Satisfaction with education	-.031	.076	-.180	.118	-.026	.681
Academic exhaustion	.466	.033	.342	.590	.405	<.001
Academic self-efficacy	-.010	.087	-.181	.161	-.009	.906
Perception of course value	-.171	.078	-.325	-.018	-.157	.028
Well-being	-.003	.057	-.116	.110	-.003	.953

To examine the moderating effect of family support (FS) on the relationship between each of three predictors—Academic Exhaustion (AE), Autonomy Difficulties (AD), and Vocational Difficulties (VD) – and dropout intentions (DOI), three moderation analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 1, Hayes, 2022). Results show that the three moderating models were significant, and explained 30%, 17% and 25% of DOI variability, respectively.

When Academic Exhaustion (AE) was the predictor, AE by FS interaction significantly increased the explained variance of DOI ($\Delta R^2 = 0.0181$, $F(1,296) = 7.69$, $p = 0.006$, 95% CI [-0.26; -0.04]). The positive relationship between EA and DOI, despite significant for the different levels of FS, was weaker for higher levels of FS ($b = .48$, $t = 6.59$; $p < .001$) than for medium ($b = .61$, $t = 10.91$; $p < .001$) and for lower levels of FS ($b = .74$, $t = 10.1$; $p < .001$) (see Figure 1). Autonomy difficulties (AD) by FS interaction

significantly increased the explained variance of DOI ($\Delta R^2 = 0.029$, $F(1,296) = 10.36$, $p = 0.0014$, 95% CI [-0.87; -0.21]). The positive relationship between AD and DOI, despite significant for the different levels of FS, was weaker for higher levels of FS ($b = .20$, $t = 2.57$; $p = .011$) than for medium ($b = .36$, $t = 6.53$; $p < .001$) and for lower levels of FS ($b = .52$, $t = 7.38$; $p < .001$) (see Figure 1). However, for values of FS over 3.8, the moderating role of FS was no longer significant. Vocational difficulties (VocD) by FS interaction significantly increased the explained variance of DOI ($\Delta R^2 = .012$, $F(1,296) = 4.71$, $p = .0308$, 95% CI [-.65; -.03]). The positive relationship between VocD and DOI, despite significant for the different levels of FS, was weaker for higher levels of FS ($b = .34$, $t = 4.65$; $p < .001$) than for medium ($b = .44$, $t = 9.06$; $p < .001$) and lower levels of FS ($b = .54$, $t = 8.79$; $p < .001$) (see Figure 1). However, for values of FS over 4.6, the moderating role of FS was no longer significant.

Figure 1. The moderating effects of Family Support (FS) on the associations between three different predictors (Academic Exhaustion (AE), Autonomy Difficulties (AD) and Vocational Difficulties (VocD)) and Dropout Intentions.



These outcomes imply that the more students perceived FS, the weaker is the positive relationship between Academic Exhaustion, Autonomy Difficulties and Vocational Difficulties (the three strongest predictors of DOI) and DOI. Therefore, FS acts as a buffer which decreases the positive influence of either AE, AD and VocD on DOI. This buffering effect of FS does not apply for moderate-high and extreme levels of FS in the case of AD or VocD, respectively.

5. Discussion

Students living away from home present higher dropout intentions than their colleagues, which is in accordance with the literature (e.g., Casanova, 2021; Sosu et al., 2019; Toyon, 2024). They seem to be worse than their colleagues in the majority of variables, both academic (e.g., satisfaction with education, academic self-efficacy) and of well-being and mental health. They report more economic difficulties, which is concordant with higher expenses they necessarily face (Hauschildt, 2024). They also present higher academic exhaustion, which is the higher predictor of dropout intentions in these students, and may be related with the daily responsibilities and tasks they have to face, in addition to the academic ones. The fact that these students report more satisfaction with social support by the family is probably due to a higher need to resort to this support, due to the aforementioned difficulties. The family support has shown the ability to decrease the effect of the stronger predictors of dropout intentions, when this support has moderate levels, what stresses its protective role and is in line with the literature (Brannan et al., 2013; Sosu et al., 2019). However, pertaining to autonomy or vocational difficulties, family support at too high levels loses its moderator effect. This seems to show that too much support by the family may have a detrimental rather than a protective role, possibly reinforcing autonomy or vocational difficulties, which was also one of the strongest predictors of dropout intentions. Moreover, it is possible that these students already are in a more negative academic and personal situation, intending to leave higher education, what leads them to search for more intense family support. Future research should explore this topic to clarify this issue. In conclusion, programs to decrease dropout in higher education should consider the specific needs and conditions of students living away from home, which may be at higher risk.

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