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**PERSISTENCE IN
HIGHER EDUCATION
IN UNFAVORABLE
CONTEXTS. A CASE
STUDY**

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Abstract: The research focused on two problematic foci: (i) the affectation that the structural characteristics of the context in which a Higher Education (HE) organization is registered, when it is an unfavorable socio-academic context, produces in the conditions inherent to the student that enters, especially in their willingness and motivation towards learning; (ii) the evaluation of the degree to which this affectation puts student persistence at risk. In the case of Rivera, in the northeast of Uruguay, the structure of job opportunities and, fundamentally, tertiary educational opportunities – scarce and not very diversified – constitutes a breeding ground for risk events of dropping out of studies. The main objective of the research was to provide solid inputs –that is, theoretically consistent and empirically supported– for the elaboration of a “pro-persistence” model for students in HE applicable to unfavorable socio-academic contexts and therefore surpassing, in its applicability, the The most accepted model in the current academic world: the «Model of Institutional Action for Student Success» (MIASS) formulated by Tinto in 2012. The research took special account of some relevant theoretical and conceptual approaches on the subject, among which were The most recent wines by Tinto, Seidman, Kuh and Pascarella and Terenzini stand out for their depth and rigor. The research assumed a meso-structural approach and a predominantly qualitative methodological strategy: documentary analysis, in-depth interview, discussion group; a census survey was also applied. The most relevant of the results achieved is that in places with few higher education options, such as Rivera, the possibilities of student persistence are notoriously restricted, since in these cases the intrinsic motivation of the student towards their studies is usually weak: a considerable Many students, upon graduating from high school, decide to take one of the few

HE programs available in their city and not the one they would prefer to take if that option existed. This weak motivation is, therefore, the main risk factor for dropout, especially in the first year. This finding constitutes the substantive basis on which a model will have to be developed. Alternative student “pro-persistence” to MIASS, as applicable in unfavorable socio-academic contexts. Here lies the main contribution that this research can offer to HE organizations registered in contexts with reduced educational and job opportunities, both in terms of an attractive job placement (during higher education or at the end of it) and, especially, to an offer of It is scarce and little diversified.

Keywords: Student Persistence, Unfavorable Contexts, Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

In the current academic production aimed at analyzing or promoting student persistence in Higher Education (HE), there is a clear predominance of studies that focus on those explanatory factors of dropout whose approach is within the reach of the direct action of educational centers. The paradigmatic example of this type of study is the one that gave rise to the «Model of Institutional Action for Student Success» recently proposed by Vincent Tinto (2012a), undoubtedly the author who, in light of the profuse number of citations and allusions that has received, is for several decades the most recognized theoretical reference on the subject.

However, the applicability of this model and other closely related ones –such as Seidman’s (2012), among others– is restricted. Indeed, this paper presents some results of an eminently qualitative research that has verified that in the case of unfavorable socio-academic contexts –such as those existing in the northeastern region of Uruguay, and

especially in the city of Rivera– corresponds pay special attention to two other complexes of explanatory factors for dropping out in HE whose study tends to be, at best, marginal: the aspects inherent to the student at the time of his admission to HE and the conditions of the territorial context in which he the educational center is registered – in the terms of Tinto (2012a, p. 257), “internal commitments” and “external commitments” respectively–.

PROPOSED PROBLEM

In the geographical areas that concentrate most of the current academic production on the problem of dropout in HE, the structural conditions of the context in which the educational center is registered do not seem to have a significant influence on the early truncation of academic trajectories. This is evidenced by a large number of recent works of great acceptance in the Western scientific community, among which the following stand out: in the US, Tinto (2012a; 2012b; 1987), Seidman (2012; 2004), Habley, Bloom and Robbins (2012), Kuh et al. (2010) and Cabrera et al. (2014); in England, Merrill (2015); in Belgium, Pinxten et al. (2015); in Australia, Krause et al. (2005) and McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001); in Spain, Figuera and Torrado (2014).

This is surely due to the fact that in large and medium-sized cities in these geographical areas, the existence of a very wide and diversified offer of studies in HE makes it possible to adequately satisfy the demand of newcomers at that level, and thus contributes to the efficiency in the eventual implementation of plans, programs or actions of school retention. This situation is very favorable to student persistence, since the student’s intrinsic motivation towards the chosen academic option is not obstructed or weakened at the time of beginning their higher studies. In these cases, the risk factors

for dropping out of the studies are restricted to some aspects inherent to the student (“internal commitments”: academic competences, personal and attitudinal attributes, among others) and to those others that can be addressed from the management of their own educational centers or the institutions that govern them (“institutional commitments”: quality of teaching, organizational climate, curriculum, academic, social and economic support, promotion of social integration and academic involvement, among others).

The model proposed by Tinto (2012a) is very clear in this regard. As illustrated in Fig. 1 below, the elements that appear enclosed in the larger circle – “institutional commitments” – constitute the focus of their analyses; in fact, he himself called it the «Institutional Action Model». On the other hand, he devotes tangential attention to elements outside of that circle, which is already evident in the content of the survey form provided by the National Survey of Student Engagement, originally published by Kuh et al. (2010), the main instrument for providing the model with a factual basis.

In this regard, the intuition that prompted the execution of the research reviewed here is that in the case of HE centers enrolled in unfavorable socio-academic contexts, the elements that appear included in this model in the rectangles outside the circle are relevant. Noun in the academic trajectories of students, especially in its early truncation. These elements can be grouped into two sets that, although different, are interdependent. One of them is the one that includes the conditions, situations and circumstances inherent to the student at the moment in which he decides to enter an HE center -”internal commitments”-, such as his academic preparation (basically his cognitive skills and knowledge previous), their personal attributes (the moment of their life trajectory, gender and class attributes,

especially their cultural and economic capitals), their expectations, attitudes and disposition towards learning. The other set includes the eminently structural conditions typical of the territorial context in which the center is part of – “external commitments” –:

the structures of educational opportunities (especially the nature, breadth and diversification of the existing tertiary study offer) and labor (mainly the possibilities of labor insertion during higher studies and/or once the HE is accredited).

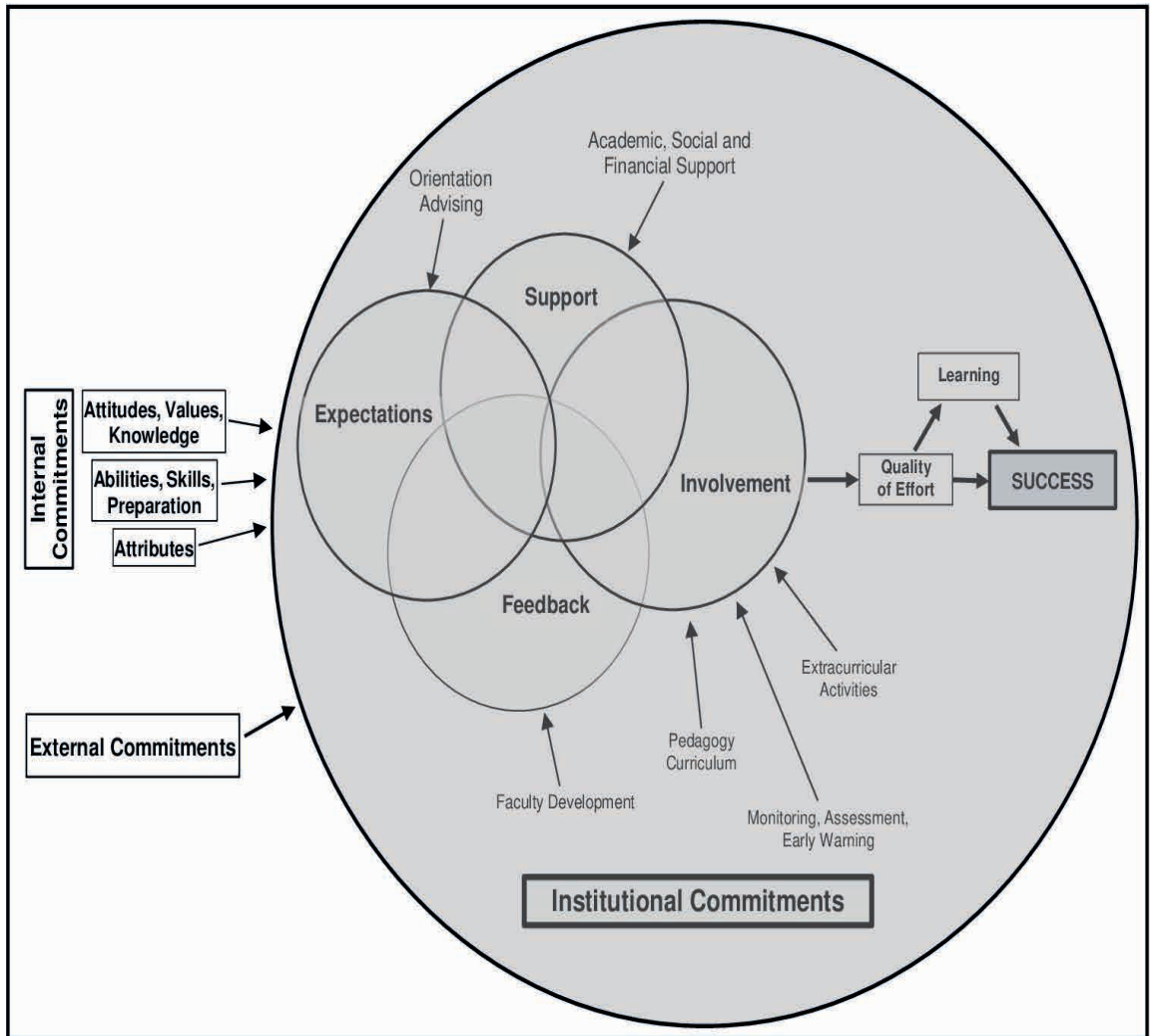


Fig. 1. Tinto's institutional action model: «Elements of a Model of Institutional Action»

Source: Tinto (2012a, p. 258)

In response to these considerations, the investigation focused on two problematic foci. On the one hand, in the affectation that the structural characteristics of the context in which the Rivera's HE organizations –«external commitments»– produces in the conditions

inherent to the student who enters any of them –«internal commitments»–, especially in their attitudes, disposition and (lack of) motivation towards learning; on the other, in the evaluation of the extent to which this affectation leads to putting student persistence at risk. In

both cases, the underlying conviction is that these two phenomenal complexes (“external commitments” and “internal commitments”) present very different configurations and contents in Rivera than those existing in places whose socio-academic contexts are more favorable. Thus, the characterization of that affectation is essential for determining and weighing the explanatory factors for dropping out of HE studies in unfavorable socio-academic contexts.

CONTEXT IN WHICH THE PROPOSED PROBLEM IS INSCRIBED

In the last decade, the speeches and texts that highlight the crises that nest in Uruguayan public education have grown exponentially. In addition, since the end of the last decade, the generalization of access to HE and the reduction of disaffiliation at that level constitute an explicit aspiration of the authorities of the sector, especially those of the University of the Republic (Udelar), the institution of It is that it combines the greatest tradition, population volume and social relevance in contemporary Uruguay. This aspiration becomes a concern if it is assumed, on the one hand, that “our country is among those in the region with the least access to higher education, below average and far from others with similar levels of development” (Fernández and Cardozo, 2014, p. 123) and, on the other, that of every three students who enter HE almost two drop out, half of them between the first and second year (Boado, Custodio and Ramírez, 2011). Other recent studies (CIFRA, 2012) support this statement in the case of educational centers in charge of teacher training for Primary Education and Secondary Education, today dependent on the Education Training Council (CFE) of the National Public Education Administration (ANEP) but in process of acquiring university

character.

The research reviewed here has found that the dropout rate in HE in Rivera is similar to the national average. However, this similarity conceals very different conditions, situations and circumstances, whether considering different geographical spaces or different SE organizations: notoriously dissimilar opportunity structures, risk events of a different nature and relative importance (Acevedo, 2013; 2011; 2009). Likewise, at least in the case of the northeastern region of Uruguay, the inadequate structure of job opportunities and especially tertiary education –both in terms of scarcity and little diversification of the offer– constitutes a breeding ground for risk events, especially in the period of transition to HE, both with regard to access to that level and dropout. In addition, the effects of abandonment in SE are even more worrisome in the northeast of Uruguay, among other things because it is the region of the country that presents the highest poverty rate and the lowest indicators of development of its population. Indeed, the four departments that make up this region (of the total 19 that make up the national territory) are those that present the lowest Human Development Index in the nation (Acevedo et al., 2013, p. 31).

GOALS

Based on the above considerations, the main objective of the research was to provide solid inputs – that is, theoretically consistent and empirically supported – for the development of a “pro-persistence” model for students in the first year of HE applicable to socio-academic contexts. unfavorable (as is the case of the existing one in Rivera) and therefore surpassing, in terms of applicability, the most accepted model in the current Western academic world: the «Model of Institutional Action for Student Success»

formulated by Tinto (2012). The main of these inputs - and, therefore, one of the most notable contributions offered by the research in question - is the determination of the main factors involved in dropping out of studies in the first year.

In the three existing public educational centers of that level in Rivera: the Rivera University Center (Udelar), the Northern Regional Center for Teachers and the Rivera Teacher Training Institute (the latter dependent on the CFE of the ANEP).

The specific objectives established for full compliance with this general objective are described below:

(a) Determine the current magnitude of the phenomenon of dropping out of studies in the first year of HE in the three existing public centers of that level in Rivera.

(b) Identify and analyze the main characteristics of the conditions and circumstances that currently have the most impact –and the differential way in which they do so– in the decision of students to abandon their studies in the first year of HE in each one of these three schools.

(c) Determine the (external) contextual conditions with the greatest incidence in the decision of young people to start higher education in Rivera, with emphasis on the analysis of the demotic, sociocultural and economic particularities of the northeastern region of Uruguay and the structure of existing opportunities.

(d) Determine the conditions and characteristics of the entrants to HE (self-perception of their academic preparation and their competencies –specific knowledge, skills, attitudes–, attributes –gender, social class, capital structure–, preferences, expectations, interests–economic, prestige, sociality–) that most influence their decision to start studies at Rivera, especially those associated with the intrinsic motivational dimension.

THEORETICAL LINES USED

In the formulation and design of the research, some relevant theoretical and conceptual proposals on the subject investigated were especially taken into account, which for reasons of space we will not detail here. Among them, those included in some works published in the US in the last decade stand out due to their depth and rigor (Tinto, 2013; Seidman, 2012; Shavit, Arum and Gamoran, 2007; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Rumberger, 2004; Choy, 2001) and others in Spain (Figuera and Torrado, 2014; Zabalza, 2002; Casanova, 2007). Likewise, special attention was paid to the existing national production in this regard, both for its theoretical-conceptual consistency and for its particular empirical anchorage. In this sense, the following works stand out, almost all produced by researchers from the Udelar Faculty of Social Sciences: Fernández (coord. and ed., 2010), Fernández (2010), Fernández and Cardozo (2013), Cardozo (2013), Cardozo et al. (2014), Young Man (2010; 2000), Boado and Fernández (2010), Boado, Custodio and Ramírez (2011), Acevedo (2014; 2011; 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The research assumed a meso-structural approach, that is, an explanatory approach that, based on the prioritization of the consideration of local and organizational aspects (above microsocial and macrosocial ones, although without ignoring them) combines a “focus on the role of school organizations on behavior (in this case disaffiliation) [with] approaches that highlight the relationship between the characteristics of the locality in terms of population [...] or socioeconomic marginalization” (Fernández, 2010, p.29).

For the production of information necessary to account for the formulated

research problem, a predominantly qualitative strategy was established, with appeal to various information production techniques: documentary analysis, in-depth interview, discussion group. The survey technique (census) was also applied. The information production techniques used and their context of application are briefly described below.

The documentary analysis technique was applied with a view to fulfilling the first of the proposed specific objectives: to determine the current magnitude of the phenomenon of dropping out of studies in the first year of HE in the three existing public centers of that level in Rivera. It included the survey, registration, processing and analysis of administrative documents from each of the three educational centers considered.

The in-depth interview technique was applied to 70 qualified informants who were previously categorized according to the five “types” described below:

i. (6) people with in-depth knowledge and/or ability to influence the decision-making processes of each local productive sector in the last decade. The application of these interviews was aimed at fulfilling the specific objective (c) described above.

ii. (7) actors with in-depth knowledge of the situation of HE in the region and of the changes that have occurred in the sector in the last decade. The application of these interviews was aimed at fulfilling the specific objective (b) described above.

iii. (9) actors with in-depth knowledge of one(s) of the three HE centers studied. The application of these interviews was also oriented towards the fulfillment of the specific objective (b).

iv. (24) young people who, having started their studies in one of these three centers in 2014, continued studying there once the third school year began (in 2016). The application

¹ The two “Appendices” included at the end of this text present the technical validation tables of the in-depth interview guidelines applied to “types” (iv) and (v) informants.).

of these interviews was oriented to the fulfillment of the specific objectives (b) and (d).

v. (24) young people from the same cohort who abandoned their studies within three months of the start of the third year of HE. As in the previous case, the application of these interviews was also oriented towards the fulfillment of specific objectives (b) and (d).¹

The census survey technique was applied to the informants of the «types» (iv) and (v), and was oriented towards the fulfillment of the aforementioned specific objective (d).

The focus group technique was applied to a group made up of six of the twelve informants of the «type» (iv) interviewees (two students from each of the three HE centers in Rivera who, having begun their studies in one of those centers in 2014, were still there as of July 2016) and six of the twelve informants of the “type” (v) interviewed (two students from each of those centers who, having started their studies in 2014, had abandoned them by July 2016). The selection of these twelve informants was made based on the analysis of the information provided in an in-depth interview situation.

RESULTS

The most relevant of the results achieved in the research is that in those places where few HE study options are offered, as is the case of Rivera, the possibilities of student persistence are notoriously restricted. This is due to the fact that in places with these characteristics, the intrinsic motivation of the student towards pursuing higher studies in one of those few available options is weak. In short, a considerable number of students, upon graduating from Higher Secondary Education (or Baccalaureate), make the decision to take one of the few HE “careers” offered locally, and not the one they would prefer to take if such an option existed in the existing offer.

Consequently, the weak intrinsic motivation of the vast majority of students who start HE studies in these types of places stands as the most important risk factor for dropping out of studies, especially in the first year.

On the other hand, from the in-depth interviews carried out with the qualified informants of the «types» (iv) –persistent students– and (v) –non-persistent students– the existence of a condition of a cultural nature emerged clearly: the vast majority of these people have not taken into consideration the possibility of pursuing higher education in cities where the existing offer is broader and more diversified, such as Montevideo (capital of Uruguay) or Porto Alegre (capital of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil), both located 500 kilometers away from Rivera; those people who at some point considered that possibility decided to stay in their place of residence anyway, in some cases citing economic reasons and in other emotional reasons. In any of the cases, a kind of reluctance to move away from their place prevails, as well as ignorance of the existence of financial support scholarships aimed at making this transfer possible, student residences, etc.

Lastly, unlike the existing situation in places where socio-academic contexts are favorable –above all because they present a sufficiently broad and diversified HE offer–, in places like Rivera it is very difficult and unlikely that the dropout risk factors of the studies mentioned above can be faced through actions promoted by the academic and organizational management of the educational centers themselves. This type of action is precisely the one that appears to occupy a leading role in the two currently most accepted models of school retention (or «pro-persistence») in the international academic field: the aforementioned Model of Institutional Action for Student Success (Tinto, 2012) and the closely related Retention Formula and Model

for Student Success (Seidman, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE THEME

In accordance with what has been highlighted above, the aforementioned models are not entirely valid or applicable in the case of HE centers which, as is the case of those based in Rivera, are enrolled in institutional contexts with a scarce and little diversified offer of studies of IS; Strictly speaking, they would only be suitable and effective for guiding the promotion of persistence (or retention) of those few students whose preferences for studies in HE coincide with one of those offered locally, that is, those who have intrinsic motivation oriented toward the higher education option chosen.

In conclusion, the preliminary results achieved up to now constitute the substantive bases on which an alternative student “pro-persistence” model applicable in unfavorable socio-academic contexts will have to be developed, in which the consideration of aspects that in the «Model of Institutional Action for Student Success» (2012a, p. 258) appear located outside the great central circle: «internal commitments» and «external commitments». Herein lies, then, the main contribution that the outlined research can offer to those HE organizations registered in contexts characterized by structures of educational and labor opportunities of little amplitude, both in terms of the reduced possibilities of aspiring to an attractive labor insertion (during higher studies or at the end of them) and, especially, to a scarce and little diversified offer of higher studies.

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Appendix 1. Technical validation table of the in-depth interview pattern applied to informants of the “type” (iv)

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	APPLIED TECHNIQUE	APPLIED INSTRUMENT	VARIABLES CONSIDERED	INDICATORS (or QUESTIONS)
(b) Identify and analyze the main characteristics of the conditions, situations and circumstances that most affect –and the differential way in which they do so– in the decision to voluntarily drop out of studies in the 1st year of HE in each of the three educational centers considered	In-depth interview with a sample of 24 type (iv) informants: 8 young people from each of the 3 centers considered who began their studies there in 2014 and continued there once the 3rd school year began. [The application of these interviews is after the census survey of these informants, and in which the form module from the NSSE]	In-depth interview semi-structuring guideline	Trajectory and pre-tertiary preparation	Where did you study 6th year of EMS? In what orientation? Do you remember why you chose that orientation?
				How do you evaluate your pre-tertiary education? Do you consider that your preparation in EMS was adequate?
			Pre-tertiary preferences and expectations. Eventual changes of expectations. Expectations of completion of the “career”	When you finished 6th year of EMS, were you clear about what “career” to follow? What was that “career”? Where did you plan to take it?
				If the “career” you thought to follow is not the one you are taking now, why didn’t you take it?
				Was the “career” you signed up for when you graduated from EMS the only one you took? [If you answer in the negative:] What caused this change?
			Reasons for persistence	When you enrolled in ES, did you expect to finish the “race”?
			Reasons for persistence	Have you ever thought about dropping out of school or changing your “career”? Because? What was it that kept you studying?
			Reasons for choosing the “career”	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 7 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).
			Motivation towards the chosen “career”	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 3 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).
			academic requirement	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 3 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).
			Active learning modalities	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 5 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).
			Collaborative learning modalities	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 4 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).
			Teacher-student interaction	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 6 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).
			Trabajo	Do you work for pay? How many hours/week? Is that job linked to the degree you are studying?
			Beca de apoyo	Do you have any monetary or accommodation scholarship? Do you think that this has had any influence on the fact that you have continued studying?

Appendix 2. Technical validation table of the in-depth interview guideline applied to informants of the “type” (v)

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	APPLIED TECHNIQUE	APPLIED INSTRUMENT	VARIABLES CONSIDERED	INDICATORS (or QUESTIONS)	
(b) Identify and analyze the main characteristics of the conditions, situations and circumstances that most affect –and the differential way in which they do so– in the decision to voluntarily drop out of studies in the 1st year of HE in each of the three educational centers considered	In-depth interview with a sample of 24 informants of type (v): 8 young people from each of the 3 centers considered who began their studies there in 2014 and abandoned their studies within 3 months of the start of the 3rd school year. [The application of these interviews is after the census survey of these informants, and in which the National Survey of Student Engagement form module] National Survey of Student Engagement form module]	Pauta de semi-estructuración de entrevista en profundidad	Trajectory and pre-tertiary preparation	Where did you study 6th year of EMS? In what orientation? Do you remember why you chose that orientation?	
				How do you evaluate your pre-tertiary education? Do you consider that your preparation in EMS was adequate?	
				Pre-tertiary preferences and expectations. Eventual changes of expectations. Expectations of completion of the “career”»	When you finished 6th year of EMS, were you clear about what “career” to follow? What was that “career”? Where did you plan to take it?
					If the “career” you thought to follow is not the one you are taking now, why didn’t you take it?
					Was the “career” you signed up for when you graduated from EMS the only one you took? [If you answer in the negative:] What caused this change?
					When you enrolled in ES, did you expect to finish the “race”?
			Reasons for choosing the “career”	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 7 options presented in the NSSE form (see “Appendix”2).	
			Motivation towards the chosen “career”	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 3 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).	
			academic requirement	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 3 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).	
			Active learning modalities	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 5 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).	
			Collaborative learning modalities	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 4 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).	
			Teacher-student interaction	Formulation in interrogative mode of the 6 options presented in the NSSE form (see «Appendix» 2).	
			On dropping out of studies: reasons, character, moment	What was the main reason that led you to interrupt your studies?	
				Is your abandonment temporary or permanent?	
				Was your abandonment voluntary or involuntary?	
How long after entering did you leave the race? [in 1st semester / 2nd semester / after 1st year]					
	What was the approximate date of abandonment?				

				Work	Were you working for pay when you dropped out of your studies? How many hours per week? Was that job linked to the degree you were studying? ¿Do you think that this had any influence on the fact that you abandoned your studies?
				support scholarship	Did you have any monetary or accommodation scholarship? Do you think that this had any influence on the fact that you abandoned your studies?