Staying or Leaving the Course. Students' Experiences in Academic Elitism in Public Higher Education in Mexico

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to explore dropout and persistence in academic elitism within a higher education system under policies of expansion. This case study employs an interpretative methodology to examine the phenomenon from the perspective of students and academics. The analysis is framed under known models of student retention with the added scope of Putnam's concept of *social capital*, and Bourdieu's concepts of *academic capital, habitus, doxa, hysteresis and symbolic violence*. Research questions explore why students leave the course, how they overcome barriers to completion, and the process of gaining membership of academic elitism.

Findings unveil a hidden *doxa* of selectivity that aims at the retention of the *naturally talented and best-fit* students. Practices of *symbolic violence* are observed throughout the course. The marginalisation of disadvantaged students is legitimised by the *habitus* of the School through the imposition of the characteristics necessary to *earn* membership of academic elitism. Distancing practices among students and faculty hinder the development of *social capital*, a key element to gain access to academic and emotional support needed to build *academic capital* of relevance to the field. The *doxa* of academic elitism is internalised and approached by means of academic buoyancy and resilience. Family facilitates availability of time as a fundamental resource to be invested in academic activities, and peers and family are the source of encouragement and support to help students sustain a fragile self-concept of achievement, and intentions to persist despite marginalisation practices faced.

The lack of support and the pedagogic practices observed in the course represent a failure trap experienced with a sense of personal deficit. Leaving the course is not only explained in terms of student characteristics, but in terms of limited opportunities to succeed in a course that represents a gateway to positions of prestige and power in society.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This

work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other University. All

sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

The relevance of higher education in the construction of a society committed to sustainable development, peace, well-being, democracy and equity, calls for an increase in investment of resources and efforts to expand its scope and understand its challenges (Altbach, Reisbereg, & Rumbley, 2009). The response to this recommendation is evidenced through the commitment of governments and higher education institutions to improve coverage, equality, and quality assurance of higher education. As a result of those changes, a more diversified student body is given the opportunity to participate in higher education.

Together with the efforts to increase access to higher education come the efforts to create the opportunities to complete a programme of studies. In the light of widening participation policies aimed at opening the doors of higher education to individuals from less-privileged backgrounds, higher education institutions find themselves working with an heterogeneous student population that requires additional support to attain their educational goal and promote social mobility at an individual level, and social development as a society.

It is in the interest of governments and institutions to promote an effective and efficient provision of higher education. In this regard, the study of student dropout and persistence is an area of high interest, as non-continuation represents a form of inefficiency of the educational system. For the last four decades, research has provided the foundations to develop models and theories aimed at understanding student dropout, and the development of institutional retention strategies to address this complex issue.

Statistics report that in Mexico, only 25.5% of the population ages 20 to 24 are enrolled in education, and for the age group of 25 to 29 only 7.1% (INEGI, 2015). Furthermore, evidence for Mexico shows half of the students enrolled in an undergraduate programme will dropout by the end of the first year. Despite these statistics, research on

the phenomenon of non-continuation in public higher education in Mexico falls short considering the size of the problem.

Research on student dropout has been conducted in public higher education institutions in Mexico (De Garay Sánchez, 2001; De Garay Sánchez, 2004; De Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, & Hernández Saldaña, 2011; De Vries & Navarro, 2011; Dzay-Chulim & Narvaez-Trejo, 2012; Rodríguez Lagunas & Hernández Vázquez, 2008; Vera Noriega, et al., 2012), but to the best of my knowledge, there is no research on the decision to stay or leave the course based on the context of an elite course that enrols students traditionally identified as high achievers. While elite higher education institutions tend to have strict selection admission processes that may contribute to lower dropout rates, in the context of a mass system, academic elitism is aligned with recruitment processes that promote access to a broader student body.

Existing studies for the case of Mexican higher education are predominantly based on Tinto's model of dropout (Tinto, 1975), and Bean's interactionalist model (Bean, 1980), both developed in a context that differs significantly from the one encountered by students in public universities in Mexico. The nuances observed in the decision of staying or leaving a course with characteristics that cannot be overgeneralised, such as academic rigour and time demands, call for new research that offers detail of the influences that bore on individual students' decision. The aim of my research is to introduce notions that large-scale macro studies miss, and to problematize a phenomenon in order to gain a deep and rich understanding of the student experience in a school that escapes the scope of overgeneralised institutional studies.

The present study focuses on the impact of the School and familial *habitus*[1], the dispositions that determine how the world is experienced at home and at School, and how the practices legitimised practices of the School, the *doxa*, influence the transition and

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[1] This concept, as well as *symbolic violence*, *hysteresis*, and *doxa*, will be introduced more fully in Chapter 1.

integration to an environment of academic elitism. In the process, known factors associated with the decision of dropping out or staying in education are emerged in an environment of silent violence exercises by the dominant group, represented by academics. Contrastively, it is observed that peer interactions help improve academic performance, and promote elements that foster permanence. Regarding academic staff, emotional labour and carelessness in higher education are identified as key elements that shape the limited interaction between academic staff and students. Beyond the evident factors that explain the decision to leave, namely academic failure, I identify a discourse of selectivity that fiercely defends the idea that not all students admitted are ready for academic elitism. *Symbolic violence* and power relations have an impact on poor academic performance and difficulties to complete the course.

Perceived as a social responsibility or as a measure of institutional efficiency, the provision of student support in encouraging the completion of a programme of study is a central challenge higher education systems need to understand and address, particularly under the scenario of a growing heterogeneous student body. This study aims at promoting the discussion and consideration of such elements in academic elitism under policies that promote the expansion of higher education.

Scope

Given the complexity of the definition of the phenomenon of dropout in higher education, and the complexity of data collection, some limitations have to be set to conduct this research. Data for this study was obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with students who left the course before completion, henceforth called '*leavers*'; students enrolled in the course at the time of data collection, henceforth called '*students in progression*'; and those who completed all the modules required to graduate, henceforth called '*persisters*'. I also interviewed academics teaching undergraduate students, and their

participation offers an institutional perspective for the case under study. It is beyond the scope of this research to discuss the process undergone by students who transfer to a different programme, complete a similar programme at a different institution, or withdraw completely from higher education.

Literature suggests that dropout from higher education institutions is a multifactorial phenomenon and a longitudinal process. For that reason, this study includes the perspective of students who left the course not only in the first year, but in further stages of progression, and the *students in progression* who participate in the study represent seven different cohorts, allowing an exploration of the different stages that build up the experience of earning membership. I chose thematic analysis as the analytic method, guided by theories and models of dropout and retention found in the literature. The purpose is to explore how barriers are observed in the particularities of a course of high academic rigour, considering the cultural and organisational differences that characterise Mexican public higher education institutions compared to those predominant in the context where those models were developed.

Objective of the study

The main objective of this study is to understand why students leave the course and how barriers to completion are overcome to persist in academic elitism. The need to conduct research of this nature answers the limitations that existing dropout and persistence explanatory models have concerning contexts with characteristics that escape the generalities produced by large-scale theories and models. This research aims to inform policy makers on the needs students experience to transition and persist in academic elitism in a mass system, considering the micro perspective of psycho-social and academic behaviours adopted, and how the misalignment of social and academic practices influences students' decision to either stay or leave a course of high academic rigour.

Literature on student progression at university suggests that, together with factors related to the institution, poor subject choice, poor academic performance, and financial difficulties are among the reasons why students withdraw from university (Yorke & Longdem, 2004). Thomas (2002) points at the influence of institutional *habitus* on the decision to leave, particularly in reference to non-traditional students, and how not being able to develop a sense of belonging leads students to leave. Additionally, in the study of the impact of university on students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) discuss the effects of higher education on attitudinal, intellectual, moral, educational and psychosocial development, summarising that students undergo a number of immediate changes when attending college that can have a long-term impact on student development.

The case under study is the undergraduate degree in economics at a top state university in Mexico. The course has a historically high dropout rate, and is under pressure to enrol more students as the demand for places in state universities has increased in the last decade (see Chapter 2). The undergraduate degree in economics is top two in the country[2], it sets high academic demands on students, and is known for promoting competence and individualism. The idea of building a community and working towards student integration is experienced under an environment where *symbolic violence* is constantly observed, and this characteristic represents an additional challenge that students encounter in their transition to higher education.

Contribution to knowledge

This research presents a novel case in the study of dropout and retention in higher education. Its novelty resides firstly on presenting a case study of academic elitism in a mass university system, in a country in which dropout and retention studies are rather scarce. Additionally, the case presented involves students who tend to have a background of high-

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[2] According to El Universal (2017) and El Universal (2015), the School ranked top 2 and top 5 respectively.

achievement and base their course choice mostly on high-aspirations and a positive self-image. Once enrolled, and throughout different stages of their experience in the School, students face normative incongruences that weaken their initial positive self-concept and attitudes. Historically low completion rates, which range from 24% to 37% (Vega-Facio, 2000), are linked to School practices that serve a discrimination process based on academic performativity aimed at the selection of those *best-fit* to graduate. The culture of academic elitism assumes students have to earn their place based on natural talent or merits, and student support to promote completion is not a priority at the School. Pedagogic practices are guided by a discourse of individual work, and students are left to develop the abilities, behaviours and values aligned with the expectations of the School under an educational model aimed at selectivity post-enrolment.

In researching why students leave the course before completion and identifying the facilitators to persistence, my research unveils a hidden discourse that explains failure in terms of individual deficit and the need to maintain a status quo of selectivity and homogenisation of students. Academic failure and low levels of effort are identified by academic staff as the main reasons why students leave the course, yet this research exposes how mechanisms of *symbolic violence* drive students to doubt their capability to meet academic demands, which subsequently weakens their motivation to maintain or increase their efforts towards completion.

Bourdieu's concepts of *symbolic violence*, *doxa*, *habitus* and *hysteresis*[3] help understand how the School practices disconnect from policies of a mass system, interested in widening the scope of higher education and increase participation and attainment. It is also observed how the School normalises pedagogic practices that set expectations of high levels of engagement and low levels of achievement, which work in detriment of student engagement and intentions to persist.

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[3] See Grenfell, 2008.

Finally, this research provides evidence in line with finding in the literature on the role interpersonal relationships have on the decision to stay on the course, and the impact of student-faculty relationships on the overall student experience (Bean & Kuh, 1984; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Pascarella, 1980). In this regard, distancing practices observed in academics and issues of mental health and loss of self-confidence experienced by students are identified as areas to be addressed in a context that exposes students to high levels of frustration and stress. This calls for an assessment of the impact these elements have on students' experiences, and to ponder academics' capacity, capability and interest in taking a caring role. Findings of this research call for a revision of pedagogic practices that generate adverse scenarios to the student experience and promote the marginalisation of students in disadvantaged circumstances.

Organisation of the thesis

Following this introduction, this thesis is divided in nine chapters. Chapter One presents a review of the literature that frames this study. The definitions of key terms used throughout this thesis are presented. The theories and models that served as reference to conduct this study are introduced in this chapter, together with alternative concepts used in the analysis of the decision of staying or leaving the course in this research. Chapter Two focuses on the state of higher education in Mexico, and an overview of the challenges of non-completion and how higher education institutions have approached this issue. Chapter Three details the case study research design and the use of in-depth interviews as the method to conduct this study. I justify my choice of an interpretative approach and thematic analysis to explore data. I also provide detail information of the context of the study and the participants of this study. Chapter Four presents the School-related barriers to completion faced by '*leavers*' followed by the discussion of non-School related barriers discussed in Chapter Five. Chapter Six focuses on the facilitators to persistence identified among

'*persisters*,' and Chapter Seven presents the experience of '*students in progression*' towards

gaining their membership of academic elitism, not only in the first year, but throughout

their progression in the course. Chapter Eight, discusses the perspective of faculty members

of the phenomenon of dropout in the context of this Study, and the role they perceive to

play in the decision-making process experienced by students of either staying or leaving the

course. Chapter Nine presents conclusions and recommendations for policy making and

further studies.

1. Dropout and Persistence in Higher Education

This chapter presents the literature review on dropout and persistence in higher education, and it explores the barriers to completion found in the literature and recommendations to prevent dropt. After students go through a selection process and are admitted to start their studies, expectations on their success are built for both the institution and the individual, and both internal and external factors interact in the process of deciding whether to stay or leave. Some of those factors are beyond the institutional reach, and even though institutional actions are limited to the realm of their context, the awareness of the existence of external factors is necessary to understand the departure process and, when relevant, inform and promote policies and interventions to improve opportunities for permanence and eventually attainment in education.

1.1 Defining Key Terms

Before entering into a discussion of dropout and persistence, I will introduce definitions for key terms. In the existing literature, the terms dropout and persistence present nuances that derive from different ways of approaching and explaining student departure and attainment.

1.1.1 Dropout

Despite the variations in the definition of the term 'dropout' found in the literature, all the meanings tend to be associated with the concept of departure, and the differences identified are influenced by the conditions that frame the departure. Spady (1970) synthesises the existing literature on college dropout at that time, and presents two definitions for the term, one referring to students who leave the institution they were originally enrolled in, and the second one referring to students who do not get a degree

from any institution. Astin (1975) uses the term to refer to those individuals who failed to obtain a degree within the expected time of completion, which means those who completed their studies in a longer period of time would fall into the category of dropout. Tinto (1993) uses it to refer to students who depart from all systems of higher education, transfer to a different institution of higher education, or depart from the degree they were originally enrolled in. Similarly, Bean (1980) uses the term 'student attrition' to refer to students who decide to stop being a member of an institution of higher education, and Seidman (2012) associates the term dropout to any student in higher education who has originally planned to obtain at least a bachelor's degree but does not achieve the goal.

Researchers have been flexible in the use of the term dropout, allowing the concept to take many different definitions. This poses the risk of assuming that all types of departure could be referred to as the same thing, and that a given institutional action would be suitable to approach dropout, regardless of the form of departure that a specific context faces (Tinto, 1993). A second challenge with regard to the definition of the term dropout is the negative connotation of student failure associated with it. Tinto (1993) and Seidman (2012) suggest should the student be held responsible, the institution should also be held partly responsible for the decision to depart.

For the Latin American context, other definitions can be found for the term dropout, observing the differences in the way higher education institutions work in the region. González (2005) uses the term to refer to a voluntary and permanent decision to withdraw from the programme students were originally enrolled in. In the Latin American region, many universities are organised as systems comprised by a number of campuses, located in different areas of the city or in several cities in the country, and each campus is organised by schools offering a range of courses. In a study conducted in the context of a Mexican institution of higher education, Rodríguez Lagunas and Hernández Vázquez (2008) use the term dropout to refer to four different scenarios: students who change their course within

the same school and the same campus; students who change their course within the same campus; students who change their course to a different school and a different campus; and students who permanently leave the university system. On the other hand, the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES) uses the definition suggested by Altamira (1997), which defines dropout as the outcome of four different situations: the voluntary and definite departure from higher education studies resulting from social or personal problems; academic deficiency, when students are forced to leave their studies for not fulfilling the academic requirements of the programme; a change to a different course, since those students become dropouts for the institution they were originally registered with, and become part of a new cohort in a different institution; and the consequence of being expelled for disciplinary misconduct.

Within a single school context, as it is the case of my research, dropout can be analysed by asking three questions: when, where and how. *When* refers to the stage when students decide to abandon their studies, either in the early weeks of the programme, during the first year, or at a later stage in their academic progress. *Where* emphasises whether students plan to transfer to a different school, a different higher education institution, or entirely withdrawn from higher education. *How* looks at whether students leave voluntarily or if they are forced to leave by reasons beyond them, frequently observed as the failure to meet academic requirements for progression.

Given the practical difficulties in following the longer-term trajectory of students who withdraw, dropout in this study will be considered from the perspective of continuation in a the course they enrolled, so the term is to be applied to those students who, after enrolling for the first time in an undergraduate course, leave the course and do not re-enrol for three or more consecutive semesters.

1.1.2 Retention

The concept of retention is connected to the capacity an institution has to assure students who enrol achieve the goal of graduation. There are varied definitions assigned to the concept of retention, based on the theoretical perspective under which they are used. Noel, Levitz and Saluri (1985) define it as a by-product of student success and satisfaction, and an indicator of institutional success. Retention is understood through the eyes of the institution, and I find in literature three general reasons to justify institutional efforts to prevent dropout. In the American context, Kuh, Gonyea and Williams (2005) exemplify the relevance of providing empirical evidence on student success in order to meet expectations of institutional performance requested by state and federal agencies. Another reason is given by the analysis of cost-effectiveness of retaining students, compared to the cost of recruiting new ones (McGinity, 1989). A third reason is understood as a bi-product of sound educational practices (Pascarella & Terenzin, 2005). The existence of national policies that require colleges and universities to report retention statistics produce rich data that can be used in the analysis of this phenomenon in the USA and the European Union.

It is clear from the definitions provided above that the concept of retention is associated with the perspective of the institution, for the perspective of the student, the term *persistence* is better suited.

1.1.3 Persistence

The concept of persistence tends to be used interchangeably with that of retention, yet, it is identified that persistence refers to the effort set by the student in completing the course, so it is a term that brings the student perspective into view (Hagedorn, 2005). As the nature of persistence is relevant to the individual, it obeys personal drive and not an element of institutional effectiveness in completing a particular goal, be it passing a module or completing a course. Tinto (2016) suggests persistence is a form of motivation, and for

institutions, this requires a new perspective where policies aim not at making students stay, but at fostering students' interest in wanting to stay and complete the course.

1.1.4 Progression and lagging behind

In the literature on higher education, the term progression often refers to two different situations: student life after university and employability, a definition used by the Higher Education Academy; or the successful completion of an academic year (Hardman, Paucar-Caceres, & Fielding, 2013). For the context of this study, progression refers to the latter definition, and it embraces students who manage to enrol in a consecutive academic semester[4], regardless of the number of modules taken in the previous semester, and the number of modules to be taken in the semester they are currently enrolled in.

The complexity that arises from the varied scenarios that can be observed in the longitudinal process of deciding to stay or leave higher education requires a distinction between three main groups among students who are in progression. Stop-outs are students who decide to temporarily stop their studies, usually due to causes related to financial problems or caring responsibilities, but are determined to return (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). In the context of the present study, the institution allows students to attempt to pass a module up to six times, and when students fail for the fourth time they fall into a temporary state of being 'on hold', which means they are suspended and cannot enrol and continue until they pass the module they have failed. A third group is students who follow a pace of progression considered below the expectations, namely students who lag behind. In the latter case, progression does not refer to aiming at completing the course within a timeframe, but within the times set by the student and her circumstances.

This consideration brings the concept of lagging behind to discussion in the context of the present study, as every time students do not progress at the pace expected by the

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[4] For undergraduate degrees organised by semesters, an academic year is divided in two terms of 20 weeks each.

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institution, they will fall into the category of students who lag behind, in terms of

progression. The importance of considering progression is to keep track of the longitudinal

aspect of the process of the decision to stay or leave the course, and to observe if there is a

particular point in the progression trajectory where students find barriers towards

completion.

1.1.5 Transfers

A complex enrolment pattern is observed for 'transfer', students who move from one

institution to another. This movement is usually observed in two directions: lateral, when

moving to an institution of a similar type, and reverse, when moving to an institution that

offers lower qualifications, as in the case of community colleges in the USA (Goldrick-Rab &

Pfeffer, 2009). For the context of my study, transfers can also be observed when students

leave the course before completion and enrol in a different undergraduate course within

the same university system. Differences can be observed in the level of academic rigour

required from a course compared to another, but the difference is associated with the

subject area, not the type of degree, because students move laterally from one

undergraduate course to another (De Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, & Hernández

Saldaña, 2011). Students find themselves in this situation for different reasons, including the

incompatibility of timetable with their need to work, commuting, issues of course choice,

and dissatisfaction with the school. This group in particular represents a challenge to

monitor dropout statistics. When a student leaves a degree to transfer to another one, the

decision is registered as a dropout for a school and an enrolment for another one, resulting

in duplicating numbers and generating inaccurate figures to determine the size of the

phenomenon (Cuellar Saavedra & Bolivar Espinoza, 2006).

1.2 Theories and models of dropout and retention

In the last forty years, insightful models have been developed to describe the process of dropout from different yet complementary perspectives. The most widely referred dropout models in the literature originated within the context of the US higher education system. Tinto (1993) suggests five categories of student retention theories: psychological, economic, societal, organisational, and interactional.

Interactional theories observe the influence that interactions between the individual and the environment have on student retention. The most representative theories under this line are the Student Integration Theory developed by Tinto (1975; 1993), and the Attrition Theory by Pascarella (1980).

Psychological theories state the importance of personality traits associated to non-completion, yet no personality in particular is associated with the tendency to withdraw from higher education. Two main theories can be identified under the umbrella of psychological theories: the Student Involvement Theory by Astin (1999), and the Psychological Model of College Student Retention by Bean and Eaton (2001), which emphasises the importance of not only studying retention from the dominant sociological perspective, but the need to consider cultural differences in the way barriers are experienced.

Finally, environmental theories observe how social, economic and organisational forces affect retention. Elements such as socioeconomic status, race, financial hardship and organisational elements are observed as forces that affect completion. The most representative theories and models under this scope are the Student Attrition Theory by Bean and Metzner (1985) and the Integrated Retention Model by Cabrera, Nora and Castañeda (1993), who suggest dropout is a phenomenon that has to be studied and understood as a process that occurs over time. These theories come after the Theory of Student Departure developed by Spady (1971). In the building of the models to explain

dropout in higher education found in the literature, two main characteristics are observed: dropout is multifactorial and longitudinal, and as such, it has to be observed as a complex phenomenon.

In recent reports, the UK is positioned as the country with the highest completion rate (82%) in Europe (Vossensteyn et al., 2015), an issue of interest for researchers and institutions working towards understanding success in higher education. Yorke and Thomas (2003) address the issue of non-completion among undergraduate students in UK higher education as a topic of public interest. They observe student retention models broadly used in the USA are not suitable to explain the phenomenon of dropout in the UK context, and approach the issue by identifying six institutions of higher education that are successful in promoting widening participation and retaining students from lower income backgrounds. Their findings identify the relevance of institutions' commitment to student success as a key element to improve retention. Moreover, in an effort to explain why students fail to complete the course in UK higher education, Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) emphasise the importance not only of students' characteristics, but the outcome of those characteristics and the interaction with the institution. They identify two key elements that influence non-completion: preparedness for university and compatibility of choice.

In the following subsections, I present a brief description of theories and models widely used in the study of dropout and persistence in higher education that frame my research.

1.2.1 Student Integration Theory (Tinto, 1975, 1993)

The theoretical perspective provided by Tinto's (1975; 1993) longitudinal model of student departure has been broadly used in the study of college persistence, which a simple search on Google Scholar confirms, returning over four thousand citations. Elaborating on Spady's model (1970), Tinto (op.cit.) claims that dropout occurs when an individual is not sufficiently integrated into the system, i.e. the school environment. Two main systems are

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identified in this model of student departure: academic and social. It is suggested that both are equally important, because an individual who overrates the social integration is likely to fail in the academic requirements of the system, and similarly, students who develop an extreme integration to the academic system are likely to be isolated from the community if no attention is paid to the social integration element, which could also put them at risk of departure. In this respect, empirical evidence has shown that the importance of these two integrations have different relevance from one setting to another. Pascarella, Terenzini & Wolfle (1986) show this among students in two-year colleges, and (Terenzini et al., 1994) discuss how pathways to integration vary based on individuals' background, e.g. family, prior schooling, educational and occupational orientation and aspirations, the type of institution they attend, the peers and faculty they meet there, and the type of interactions developed.

Together with the integrative perspective, Tinto (op. cit.) considers the decision of leaving or staying to be influenced by a cost-benefit analysis where the students assess their experience in higher education, and if they identify they could get a greater benefit at an equal or lower cost outside higher education, they will look for an optimal option.

Tinto's model suggests the final dropout decision is influenced by five student-related factors, as presented in Figure 1.1. Students come to higher education with a set of characteristics, determined by family background, individual attributes and previous experiences in education; a set of two types of commitments are observed, one to the goal of obtaining a degree, the other one to being a member of a given institution, which together determine much of what students decide to do and the extent to which they decide to make an effort during their experience enrolled at a given institution. The students' experience within the institution is characterised by the integration to the academic expectations, represented by grades and intellectual development, and also by the social membership, represented by interaction with faculty members and other peers.

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The balance between social and academic integration is crucial in the reshaping of commitments that later lead to either obtaining a degree or departing from the institution.

Figure 1.1. Conceptual schema for dropout from college
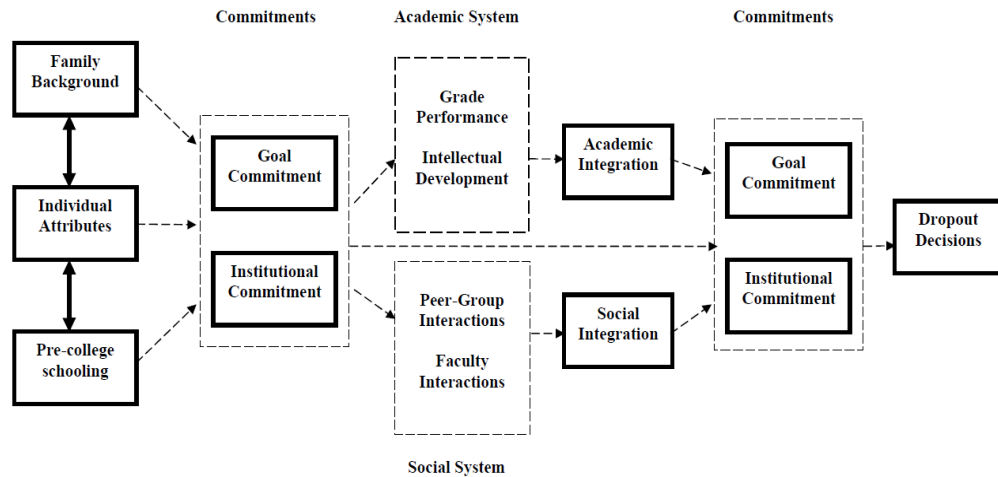
Source: Tinto (1975, p.95)

In the revised version of his work, Tinto (1993) incorporates three concepts from Van Gennep (as cited in Tinto, 1975) about rites of passage: separation, observed in the importance of leaving past communities behind; transition, to start interacting with the new group, in the ways of the group (from high-school to university); and incorporation, of the individual into the community at school. The three stages become essential in Tinto's model for students to successfully integrate into the new system, as observed in Figure 1.2.

The modification of his model adds two factors to consider: external commitments and intentions. Tinto suggests both factors have a direct influence on students' goals and their commitment to the institution, both elements of influence on permanence in education. Family, peer groups, and work environments do also have an influence on initial goals and institutional commitments, and because they represent external commitments that individuals bring to the experience, those elements should be taken into consideration in the decision-making process of staying or leaving the institution.

Figure 1.2 A longitudinal model of institutional departure
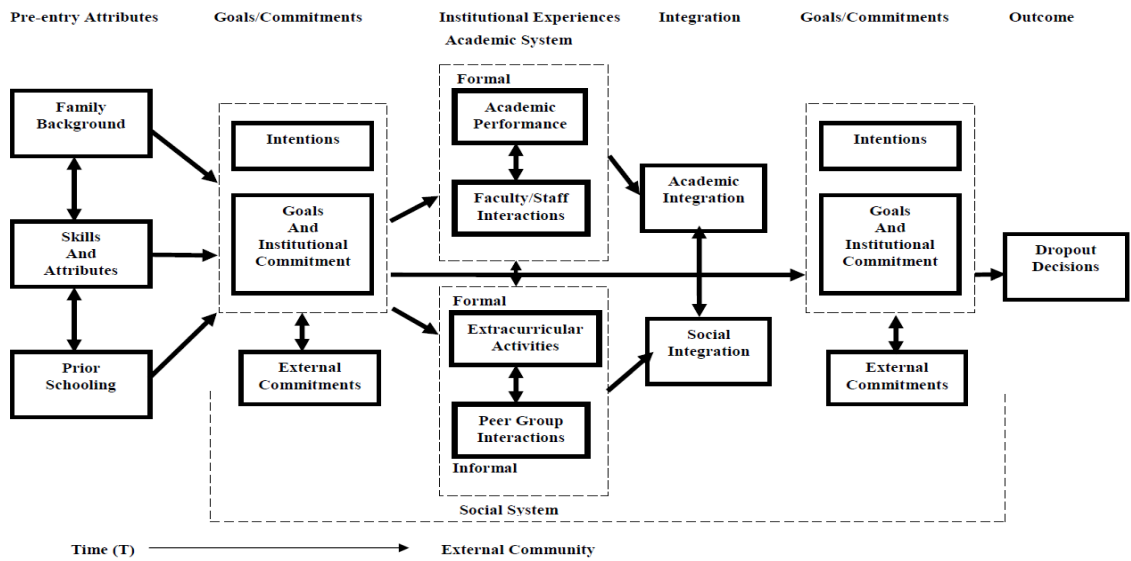
Source: Tinto (1993, p.114)

Prior to Tinto (1975), all different departures were labelled as dropout, regardless of the reason or situation that explained the decision. Tinto's seminal work offers a typology of dropouts: *academic failure*, represented by students forced to leave due to failing to meet academic requirements; *voluntary dropout*, referring to those students who, despite doing well in the academic requirements of the school, decide to depart for other reasons; *permanent dropout*, for those students who decide to detach themselves from all educational systems; *temporary dropout*, a term that groups students who decide to stop their studies for a period of time but later reincorporate to continue with their academic activity; and *transfer*, which refers to students who are committed to their goal of completing an education, but are not committed to stay at the institution they had originally enrolled in, and decide to continue their studies in another institution that best suits their needs. However, his model does not incorporate the different types of leaving behaviour identified, giving rise to criticisms to his model.

Despite the influential status of Tinto's model, one of its observed limitations is that it is based on the profile of traditional students, hence it fails to explain the case of other

groups, such as ethnic minorities, and mature students (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Kraemer, 1995; Yorke, 1999).

1.2.2 Conceptual model on student-faculty informal contact (Pascarella, 1980)

Pascarella (1980) offers a conceptual model to explain the dropout-persistence decision. His work is based on Spady (1970), Astin (1970) and Tinto (1975), and it emphasises the importance of informal interactions between student and faculty on students' educational outcomes and retention. In his findings, he identifies the interactions that bring the intellectual discussion of the study programme into an informal context outside the classroom are the most positive. Something to consider is the opportunities to keep personalised interactions in the context of institutions with large class size and a high student-faculty ratio. Class size and student ratio have to be considered together with faculty members' time availability and the importance given to promote meaningful interactions outside the classroom. These elements raise concerns regarding the limitations of the positive impact of this model in certain contexts.

According to Pascarella (op.cit), summarised in Figure 1.3, student characteristics and institutional characteristics exercise an influence on each other and on three independent variables, namely informal contact with faculty, students' college experiences, and educational outcomes. These three independent variables have an impact on each other, so that a problem in one may affect another one. Only educational outcomes directly impacts the decision to either persist or withdraw, the other variables have an indirect effect on the decision, through their effect on educational outcomes. One criticism to Pascarella's model is the fact that it was developed from a single institution study.

Figure 1.3 Conceptual model for research on student-faculty informal contact
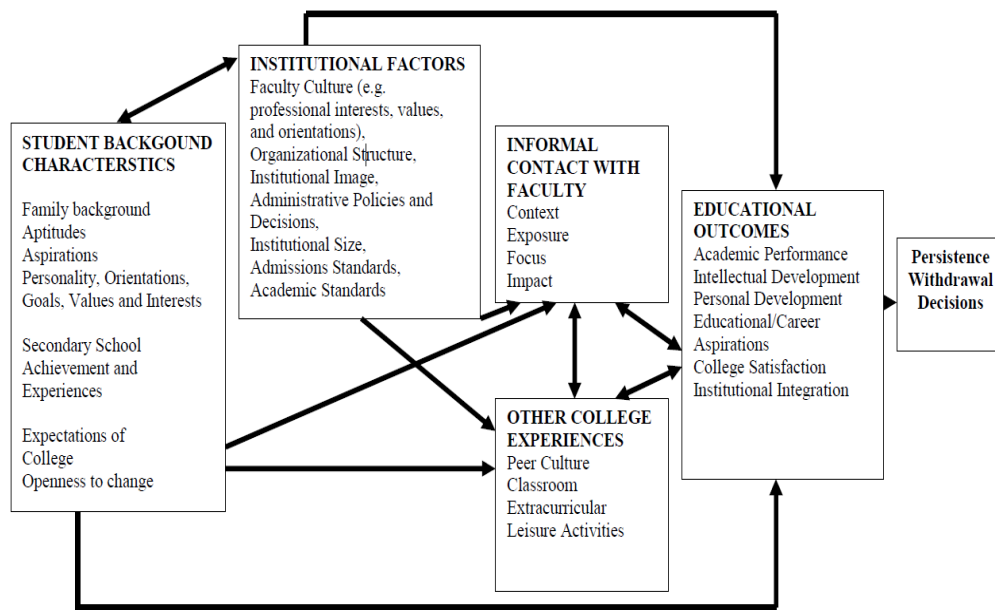
Source: *Pascarella (1980)*

1.2.3 Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1999)

Originally published in 1984, the basic element of Astin's (1999) student development theory is involvement, understood as the behaviours that reflect the effort students put into the academic experience, both physically and psychologically. The five postulates of this theory state that involvement is (1) an investment of psychosocial and physical energy, (2) a continuous concept that varies from one student to another, (3) quantitative in terms of time devoted to an activity, and qualitative in terms of seriousness given to an activity; additionally, the theory states that (4) learning while involved is related to the quality and quantity of involvement, and (5) academic performance can be correlated to involvement. Astin (op. cit.) presents involvement as an active state that can be observable, and suggests the need to link pedagogical activities in the classroom to encourage student involvement in the experience of education.

In this theory, the most valuable resource to be considered is student's time, since positive academic outcomes, connected to student persistence, are associated to the amount of time students spend on doing their academic duties. The environmental factor that is considered to have the most significant impact is student's residence, as observed in his earlier work (Astin, 1973), which suggests students who live within college have a higher probability to persist than commuter students, who do not have the same opportunities to attach to undergraduate life. Similar to the Integrational Theory, the Involvement Theory is centred on traditional students who live in campus, and this characteristic should be taken into account by researchers working with student populations of a different type.

The Theory of Involvement uses a model previously developed by Astin (1993) as a guiding framework for assessments in higher education. The model, illustrated in Figure 1.4, aims at explaining the effect that university has on students based on three elements: inputs, environment and outputs.

Figure 1.4 Input-Environment-Output model
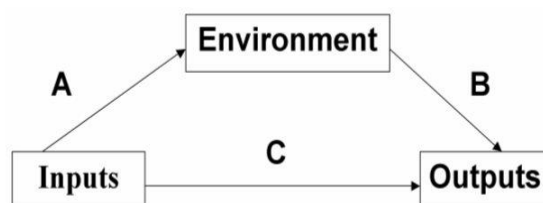
Source: Astin (1993, p.18)

The first element is inputs, in the form of what students bring into university (e.g. prior scores, personal values, family background, degree aspiration, reasons for selecting an institution, etc.). Inputs are subject to change based on what students encounter in their university experience, here is where the model considers a second element, environment, represented by any elements outside and inside the university realm that affects students (e.g. family, friends, interactions with faculty, courses, peers, societies or clubs students participate in, etc.). Finally, the third element is outputs, and this refers to the outcomes

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derived from what individuals decide to do throughout their experience as university students. In education, measurements of output include grades, exam scores, and degree completion.

Astin's theory is centred on the idea of student involvement, defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 518), but an important element to consider is the role of the environment plays in providing resources, pedagogic practices, interactions with peers and faculty, and support services that promote that integration. The combination of student-input and institution-environment will produce the outputs of the university experience, namely cognitive development, identity, social and *cultural capital*, skills, etc. In this model an important difference should be made between being involved, meaning being part of the community and activities within, and being engaged, participating in a committed and interested way that involves feeling identified with the community through activities done together, making the experience meaningful to the extent that they become a key element in the students' lives.

1.2.4 Explanatory Model of Non-Completion (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998)

The model developed by Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) is developed using qualitative data obtained from studies conducted in UK institutions among fulltime students. This model emphasises that the causes for non-completion are not only determined by the characteristics and behaviours of students, but are equally shared between the student, who was not able to integrate either academically or socially, and the institution, which was not suitable for the student either academically or socially.

The model suggests two main factors to influence the decision of departure: student preparedness and compatibility of choice. In terms of preparedness, students who are more proactive in the decision of enrolling tend to stay, because they have clearer personal

interests, ambitions, and career goals that backup the decision of going to university, as presented in Figure 1.5. Students who decide to leave tend to be more reactive in the process of deciding to go to university, and the decision is more of an expectation set on them and not by them.

Figure 1.5 Explanatory model of undergraduate non-completion
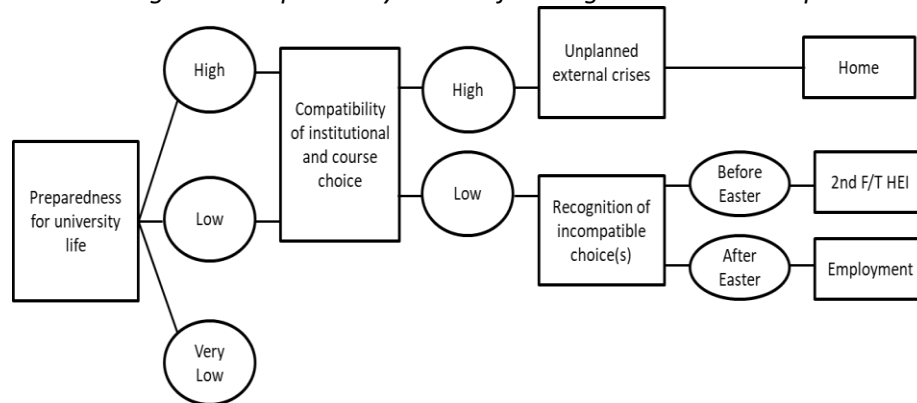
Source: Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998, p.320)

This model of non-completion suggest students come with inaccurate perceptions of university life, usually as a result of information obtained from indirect sources which distort the reality, and factors such as poor choice that can have an impact on the student, given a mismatch of expectations of the programme or the institutions, and from the institution's perspective there is a similar sense of disappointment.

In terms of compatibility of choice, proactive students tend to make choices that allow them to enrol in their first option, and intentions to leave are usually associated to feelings of homesickness. In this scenario, emphasising compatibility of choice helped students decide to persist, a situation that cannot help students whose choice is weaker and misinformed.

A contribution to the study of retention offered by this model is the incorporation of the perspective of mature students, who tend to make better decisions but also encounter challenges that are unique to their situation, as they tend to have other commitments, i.e.

family or work responsibilities, which prevent them from fully integrating to the educational setting and could suddenly change their scenario.

Finally, Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) emphasise the importance of helping students identify if they have made a poor choice as promptly as possible. They find that the longer it takes students to realise they had made a bad choice, it is more likely for them to abandon higher education as a whole, instead of exploring the chance of enrolling in a more suitable course or a more suitable institution for them.

1.2.5 Psychological Model of Student Retention (Bean and Eaton, 2001)

Bean and Eaton (2001) present an understanding of academic and social integration as an outcome of psychological development processes that observe coping behaviours, self-efficacy assessment, and locus of control (internal and external forces). They explain that social and academic integrations to the institution require attributes in students that need to be promoted, and suggest institutions should take an active role in helping students develop them. Programmes that focus on the development of self-efficacy, internal locus of control, how to approach academic and social work demands, and develop positive attitudes towards the institution, can contribute to students' self-perception of efficacy and fit to belong to the institution and meet the requirements to stay.

The model considers all students come to the institution with characteristics the institution has no control over, similar to what is stated by Astin's I-E-O model (1993), including self-efficacy, normative beliefs, and past behaviours, which initially determine how confident students are in being able to meet academic requirements, how congruent their interest in a university education is compared to the importance it has to people in students' lives, and whether students have the prior experiences that provide social and academic readiness for life in a higher education institution. Student psychological

development is presented as a process that happens within the institutional environment and is considered as a goal of institutions interested in promoting student retention.

Figure 1.6 A psychological model of college student retention
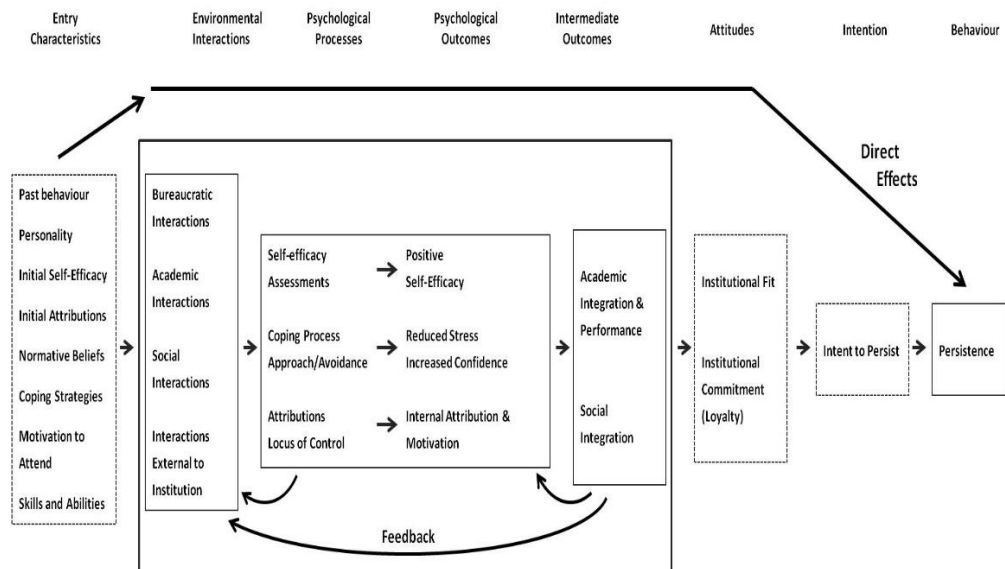
Source: Bean and Eaton, (2001, p. 76)

Figure 1.6 presents how Bean and Eaton (2001) see that individuals conduct self-assessments after interactions within the institution, a process that is described as circular and reciprocal. In developing a positive sense of self-efficacy, locus of control and copying behaviours, both social and academic integration are fostered, leading to positive attitudes of institutional fit and institutional loyalty, both key elements in the promotion of student retention.

1.3 Barriers to completion

The study of student continuation in higher education can be researched from different perspectives. Bean (2005) suggests student retention can be seen from four scopes: a theoretical one aimed at explaining the phenomenon; a policy perspective concerned with funding and the promotion of participation and permanence in higher

education; an institutional perspective, where efforts are focused on the retention of the student in a particular institution, and observes how the particularities of a context of an institution affect student participation and permanence; and an individual perspective, paying attention to individual characteristics that affect the decision to persist. Additional to the importance of analysing student persistence from different standpoints, the discussion of theories and models presented in this chapter sheds light on the importance of incorporating multiple factors to the study of this phenomenon.

In the context of the UK, widening participation policies have resulted in an expansion of students coming to higher education, and a more diverse profile in the student population. This change has raised interest in exploring the experiences of students coming from less-privileged backgrounds, and what affects their decision of withdrawing from higher education (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). For Mexico, the phenomenon of non-completion in an expanding higher education system is a topic that requires further study, and to the best of my knowledge, there is no research that explores students' experiences on non-completion in the context of academic elitism in public higher education in Mexico.

The findings from the limited literature available point at a sense of disappointment experienced by students as one of the main reasons why they leave university, as they find the quality of education offered to be below their expectations and irrelevant to their incorporation into the labour market (De Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, & Hernández Saldaña, 2011). Other studies suggest dropout can be explained in terms of financial issues faced by students, and by academic failure associated with financial issues, timetable incompatibility with the need to keep a job, and a lack of engagement (De Garay Sánchez, 2001; Dzay-Chulim & Narvaez-Trejo, 2012). Evidence also points at elements related to limited interaction between faculty and students, particularly the impersonal nature of interaction between lecturers and students, and the limited time dedicated to solve

students' doubts both in class and outside the classroom (Rodríguez Lagunas & Hernández Vázquez, 2008), without further exploring the origins of those reported behaviours.

Table 1.1 summarises variables identified to be associated to the decision to withdraw from higher education in the contexts of the USA, the UK, and in the context of public institutions of higher education in Mexico

Table 1.1 Variables associated to non-completion in the USA, the UK and Mexico

In the USA (Braxton, Vesper & Hossler, 1995)	In the UK (Jones, 2008)	In Mexico
Student entry characteristics	Inadequate preparation for higher education	Financial issues (De Garay Sánchez, 2001; Dzay-Chulim & Narvaez-Trejo, 2012)
Initial commitments	Institutional and course poor match	Institutional and course poor match (Dzay-Chulim & Narvaez-Trejo, 2012)
Expectations for college (academic and intellectual development, collegiate atmosphere, and career development)	Insufficient academic experience	Sense of disappointment on quality of education (De Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, & Hernández Saldaña, 2011)
Academic and social integration	Difficulties in social integration	Poor academic performance (Pacheco & Burgos, 2007; Dzay-Chulim & Narvaez-Trejo, 2012)
Subsequent commitments	Financial issues	Limited interaction with faculty (Hernández-Mata, Hernández-Castro, Nieto-Caraveo, & Hernández-Sierra, 2005; and Rodríguez Lagunas & Hernández Vázquez, 2008)
Reasons to return	Personal circumstances	

Source: Elaborated by author

For research in Mexico , family-financial issues refer particularly to the need to make an income to contribute to the family economy, and in terms of course choice and institution incompatibility, the reference emphasises a misalignment between what students expect from the course and what is taught and how the course is organised, i.e. timetabling. As for poor academic performance, the barriers to completion are associated to inefficient study habits and low academic engagement.

1.4 Facilitators to completion

The commitment of higher education institutions to improve graduation rates has resulted in the development of practices to support student transition, integration, and permanence in higher education. The words of Vincent Tinto, *access without support is not opportunity* (Tinto, 2008) resonate in research and empirical evidence found on the institutional and individual efforts to promote attainment. In an early work on strategies to promote student retention at community colleges, Beatyy-Guenter states: "Retention strategies can be categorized according to whether their purposes are to (1) sort students into categories or groups; (2) connect students to the institution: (3) support students in meeting their living needs; or (4) transform students and/or the institution" (1994, p. 114). It is observed how Tinto (1993) and Astin (1999) integrational and involvement theories emphasise the importance of connection among those involved in the university experience, and there is reference to the need to promote more interaction between faculty and students through mentoring programmes.

For the UK, research conducted in recent years emphasises the relevance of interactions within the university environment. Thomas (2012) suggests a sense of belonging is fundamental in promoting student persistence, and her research points at four elements identified as key to achieve a sense of belonging among students: (1) supportive peer relations; (2) meaningful interaction between faculty and students; (3) knowledge, confidence, and successful learner identity; and (4) experience of relevance to interests and future goals of students.

In nations where higher education implies a high cost for students, as it is the case of the UK and the USA, institutional efforts often come with justifications of an economic nature referred to as the *marketization of higher education*, where institutions compete for students, and losing them means a loss for institutions in terms of income (Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011). Additionally, there is the sense of social responsibility expected

from institutions, through the implementation of diverse practices that enable a heterogeneousus student population to succeed. For the case of public higher education in Mexico, the economic justification is limited, since the main source of funding comes from public money, and the income generated through student fees does not constitute the main incentive. However, accountability to the public, together with the social responsibility to improve graduation numbers and coverage, could be observed as forces behind the effort of promoting student persistence.

1.5 Alternative perspectives to understand dropout and persistence in higher education

To enrich the theoretical framework of the present study, I introduce concepts that contribute to the description of the individual and collective influences that affect the behaviour of those present in the experiences of students in the context of this study, namely family, friends, peer, faculty and students themselves. The concepts I chose to use are found in Bourdieu's works on the sociology of higher education, and the study of social capital by Putnam (2000).

Bourdieu (1973) points at the hidden mechanisms within higher education that perpetuate social differences. His work observes how outstanding students are not only the product of their effort in school and their individual abilities. Their membership of an elite with a dominant position in society is facilitated by being part of a social class that provides them with advantages, namely *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1996). The image of the *heirs of education* as the outcome of a process within higher education systems which advantages those members of privileged groups is used in the analysis of practices that reproduce power held by the groups those privileged individuals belong to. In his work on the study of higher education systems, Bourdieu presents concepts that I will use to enrich the analysis of my research, and in the following subsection, I present a brief description for each concept.

1.5.1 Field, Habitus and Doxa

Bourdieu proposes to see the world of higher education as a social space in which specific powers interact and powers are exercised by either people or institutions (Thomson, 2012). The field is that space in which those interactions occur, and just as with a football field, there are boundaries that limit what can be done, and positions occupied by agents interacting. The accepted and expected within the field is set by the powers interacting within. A key element to understand the concept of field is that it follows a hierarchy and not everyone within the field is the same, there are groups that dominate, and the activities within follow patterns and work under certain predictability, as the field is self-contained.

Another concept coined by Bourdieu to explain how behaviours are regulated and structured, without falling into the category of rules, is the complex concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* comprises a system of dispositions that are structured by the past and present circumstances experienced by the agent, and it serves to shape the present and future dispositions that in turn will generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (Maton, 2012). *Habitus* helps understand that behaviours are not random, but they obey a structure set by those dispositions, which have two important characteristics, they are *durable*, in the sense that they last throughout time, and they are *transposable*, as they change when moving to a different scene.

Habitus determines the way individuals or institutions experience the world around them, but it does not work on its own. The field and the position of the individual or institution within the field delimits the options available to behave, perceive, interpret and do in that particular point in time and place. This means our dispositions will depend on the point in time and the place where we are, our position within that field, and our own history, hence our choices on how we behave, perceive, and interpret the world are the result of a dynamic and evolving process subject to change.

Finally, the concept of *doxa* was used by Bourdieu to refer to what emerges from socialisation within a *habitus,* and what is accepted by individuals as a truth, a norm, something that is not questioned and is perceived as real. The salient element of *doxa* is how individuals do not show full awareness of that internalisation, as *doxa* is what 'people accept without knowing' (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1992). Through mechanisms of *symbolic violence,* the *doxa* is transmitted in subtle ways to dominated-individuals who in silence suffer the oppression they internalised in an invisible way.

1.5.2 Hysteresis

The element of change is present in the dynamics of *field* and *habitus*, although it tends to keep an equilibrium, yet when changes bring an interference between *habitus* and *field*, a situation of being *out of touch* is generated, and this is referred to as *hysteresis* (Hardy, 2012). Bourdieu uses the story of Don Quixote to exemplify the phenomenon of *hysteresis*, as Don Quixote chooses to use knightly dispositions, a *habitus* disconnected in place and time, expecting outcomes that in the past would have been considered within the normative, but in the settings of the present time *field*, were not compatible with his outdated choices.

This concept helps describe a phenomenon where two elements that were aligned and dependent on each other, in Bourdieu's terms *field* and *habitus*, go through a change that breaks that connection and generates a time lag between the changes that the elements go through. *Hysteresis* is a valuable concept to help understand the study of changes in the *field* of higher education and the disconnect generated if *habitus* of specific agents that are part of that *field*, be it an institution or an individual, do not change in form and time to keep the matching balance observed before the change is registered.

1.5.3 Symbolic violence

In his study of society, Bourdieu pays special attention to hierarchy and power, dominating groups, and classifications. The domination exercised by groups in power is not always the result of physical violence but a different type of violence that is not visible. The way we use language, the clothes we wear, our body language, they are all forms to express power and domination, and when a power-based hierarchy is accepted as *natural,* societies legitimise what in fact is culturally arbitrary and historical (Schubert, 2012).

Even though it is not a physical type of violence, the exercise of *symbolic violence* generates suffering. In the context of higher education, those who come from lower levels in the hierarchy are individuals willing to become members of a system that marginalises them. Expectations are based on the profile of participants who have access to symbolic capital such as cultural, linguistic, or intellectual capital, which are types of capital that facilitate the success within the system. Suffering associated with *symbolic violence* is the result of a *hysteresis* process experienced by those individuals who try to participate into a *field* unknown to them, higher education, coming with dispositions misaligned for the expectations of that *field*. Being a merit-based system, higher education rewards those who meet the expected outcomes, and the academic difficulties experienced by those from lower backgrounds are explained using the notion that intellectual inferiority is the origin of poor achievement among those coming with dispositions different from those observed in the dominant group. The feeling of inferiority experienced by those aspiring participants perpetuates the idea that higher education is a *field* for the chosen ones.

1.5.4 Cultural capital

The theory of cultural reproduction in education states that education not only aims at preparing individuals for the future, but it also serves the purpose of reproducing control of the dominant classes. This theory aims at explaining how less-privileged students will

tend to perpetuate their disadvantage within their experience in higher education, since it is shaped by the culture of dominant social classes. Bourdieu (1973) developed the idea that higher education represents a factor in the attainment of social status, and that it is the quest for social mobility that moves the expansion of higher education, with elite groups focused on extending their control on culture. For individuals from deprived backgrounds, integrating into a system designed to suit the culture of those in privileged positions denotes challenges and adverse conditions. Students from working-class families not only have to cope with the academic demands of the education environment, buy in most cases they have to combine those activities with economic activities that provide the resources needed to cover the expenses of being a student. This example shows how time, a limited resource taken for granted for the *heirs of education*, is actually a privation for those who come from a lower socioeconomic background.

In his work *The Forms of Capital,* Bourdieu (1986) suggests an explanation of the differences in educational achievement by observing the distribution of *cultural capital* of children from different social classes. He suggests that success or failure in education cannot be explained through a theory of human capital or individual attitudes only, but that an element beyond monetary incentives or natural born attributes was needed. A contribution of the theory of *cultural capital* to the understanding of educational attainment is that it considers the disproportion of economic and cultural investment made by individuals from different social backgrounds.

Just as human capital cannot be removed from the individual, *cultural capital* is part of the individual, and it cannot be detached nor integrated in an instant, but it is the result of an extended practice that creates habits, that models a person over time, and that is usually achieved within the family environment. However, this capital can also be obtained through social interactions in different environment and moments in life, provided that the individual is interested and motivated in doing so, or that the environment is stimulating

enough to achieve that transmission. Bourdieu (1977) states *linguistic capital* explains the use of language is not justified only by the linguistic competence of the speaker, but it is socially defined within a particular *field*, in the context of the present study it is the field of higher education. The way we speak, the way we dress, the texts we choose to read, they are all part of our assets, but since they cannot be measured, like economic capital, they could easily escape the study of social conditions.

Another term coined by Bourdieu (1984) is that of *academic capital,* and it considers the credentials held by academic staff, such as graduating from an elite institution, or the contribution in terms of publications produced, to mention elements of symbolic value for the construction of this type of capital. In order to accumulate *academic capital*, individuals need academic skills and knowledge of relevance to the dominating group in each context, and this may vary according to the subject area, as the academic skills, knowledge, values and behaviours required to succeed in the medical sciences may differ significantly from those required in arts, engineering or social sciences. *Academic capital* becomes a rich part of the whole *cultural capital* concept, with the difference that it is of relevance for the field of higher education, and at different levels of rigour, as it is the case of academic elitism in the present study.

In relation to higher education, *cultural capital* establishes the role that the educational system plays in sustaining and reproducing the dominance of a culture that represents higher social classes. The importance of stratification for the functioning of modern society as it is known requires the supply of a working-class suitable for manual labour, and the promise of meritocracy could only be reached by a few able to overcome their disadvantaged position (Bourdieu, 1996).

1.5.5 Two other types of capital in higher education

The interest that students show in accessing higher education responds to the prospects of better opportunities for their future. The general perception is that degrees will open doors in life to generate the means to keep fulfilling other goals, including social mobility. Higher education, perceived as a public good with private returns, seems to be an appealing way of achieving a state of welfare in modern society, a state that is strongly related to the accumulation of different types of non-tangible capital: human, cultural, and social. In this section, I briefly explore human and social capital, and discuss how they interact with educational attainment.

Human capital

The concept of human capital introduced a radical change in the perception of education in the modern world. Gary Becker (1964) proposed the concept to refer to the expenditure/investment that is made on education, health, and training. Becker suggests education, training and health are investments that improve income potential and life quality in general, so it was no longer perceived as a commodity with public returns only, but something that interests individuals mostly due to the individual benefits it provides. To date, there is a debate whether a university education actually increases the productivity of an individual or if it is just a way to send a signal to the labour market that states one is more talented and has better abilities than the average candidate for a position (Spence, 1973).

In a society where most individuals attain a university degree, the abundant offer of professionals is likely to cause an effect on the monetary benefits of holding a degree, and that is a way to explain the periods where a demand for a higher education degree decreases. If individuals realise that the benefit of having a degree does not compensate the cost in time and money of obtaining that degree, it is highly likely that they will opt out of

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education and will get a job that provides present benefits. On the other hand, when the benefit of having a degree is greater than the cost of opportunity, in terms of the income that could be made and the cost of receiving that education, this usually results in persistent students who strive to complete their studies. This theory can effectively explain at an aggregate level the effects of monetary incentives in the pursuit of an education, and if the concept of quality of education is included in the equation, it could also be explained with a similar rationale provided by the theory of human capital.

Social capital

Understood as an intangible resource derived from membership of a group, social capital provides individuals with the backup and support multiplied by the size of the network of connections they hold (Bourdieu, 1986). The relationships that build this capital are reinforced by means of exchanges among members, and the accumulation of both economic and *cultural capital* of all the members of the network consolidate the size of the social capital that any member may have access to. However, an essential characteristic of this type of capital is that individuals do not aim at the benefits in a conscious way, since the materialisation of social capital is only noticeable when exchanges occur.

The relationships that lead to membership and networking are built over time, and usually occur within a context of common ground, such as work, the neighbourhood, church or school. It is only when an effort is made to consolidate the bond among members of the group that a relationship becomes a solid connection that can go beyond the context where it was initially developed. In the context of education, the connection of mutual benefit among agents prevails beyond the context where the relationship was originated, capitalised in the form of recommendations, job offers, electoral support, and voluntary work, to mention a few.

Within the concept of *social capital,* a differentiation is made between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. *Bonding social capital*, understood as the connections developed with others who share similarities in a relevant form, such as age, social class, prior education, interests, is the main source of social support individuals have in society (Putnam, 2002) On the other hand, *bridging social capital* is developed through relationships among people who are dissimilar in evident ways. Generating this type of social capital represents a risk of rejection or criticism, given the differences among individuals, but if individuals are successful in developing it, the collaboration that emerges becomes '*crucial for getting ahead'* (Putnam, 2000, p. 23).

The benefits of social capital are not only for the individual, they have an impact on society. Putnam (1995) presents social capital in three forms: trust, social norms and obligations, and social networks of citizens, especially in the form of voluntary associations. In his work, he explains how vicious cycles in society are characterised by the lack of these three elements.

Summary

In this chapter I present the definition of the relevant concepts for this study. The many different perspectives that can be used to the study of this phenomenon call for a delimitation of their meaning used in this research. For the context of my study, dropout refers to students who, after enrolling for the first time in the course, leave and do not re-enrol for three or more consecutive semesters. The concept of persistence, which refers to the student's intention to continue on the course, is favoured over retention, as the interest of this study resides in understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of the student, not the institution. 'Lagging behind' is another concept of relevance for this study. It describes the situation of not progressing the course at the pace expected by the institution, this due to failing modules and having to re-enrol for a subsequent attempt to pass.

I discussed the models and theories that frame my work. The integrational model proposed by Tinto (1975, 1993) places social and academic integration at the centre of the study of dropout in higher education. I incorporate elements taken from Pascarella (1980), who emphasises the impact of student-faculty interaction to the decision to leave; Astin (1999), who develops the concept of involvement to understand what is behind students' efforts in persisting; Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998), who introduce student-preparedness and course choice as key elements to understand the decision of leaving; and Bean and Eaton (2001), who highlight the importance of the development of psychological elements to promote persistence. Additionally, I discuss concepts based on the works of Bourdieu, Becker and Putnam, to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon of dropout and persistence in this study using a scope of inclusion and social justice to the study of dropout and persistence in higher education.

2. Higher Education in Mexico

The benefits of higher education to society and individuals have been broadly discussed. On the one hand, there is the economic impact of education that each individual experiences, observed in terms of greater income, higher employability, and increased productivity (Becker, 1964). As for the positive effects to society, they can be identified as faster economic growth, increased tax revenues, derived from individual's higher incomes, and lower public cost on areas of health and security. On the other hand, there are non-economic benefits individuals experience from receiving more education, as Pascarella and Terenzini suggest, "cognitive, moral and psychosocial characteristics as well as values and attitudes and various indices of the quality of life... postsecondary education's influences extend beyond the individuals who attend college to the nature of their children's lives" (2005, p. 582). Similarly, derived from a more educated population, societies benefit by having citizens that participate in a more active way in civic activities, a healthier population that reduces public expenses in social security, greater social cohesion promoted by acceptance of diversity, trust, and tolerance; and a lower propensity to commit crimes, to mention a few benefits (Brennan, Niccolo, & Tanguy, 2013).

Although efforts are made to create opportunities of access to higher education, motivated by the promise of social mobility, and a socio-economic improvement at a national level, the phenomenon of dropout in Mexico disheartens the ideal of development to be fulfilled (Tuirán , 2011). Dropout in higher education poses negative effects in economic, social and cultural processes in the development of nations. Hence, it is a matter of national interest to conduct research that aims at identifying the factors that cause it and define policies and institutional actions to prevent it.

Traditionally, the growth of higher education has been explained by local contexts, as it is the case of the expansion observed in the USA after the end of WWII, and in the UK

after the recommendation of the Robbins Report in the early 1960s. For Mexico, the 1950s represented a time of growth of higher education, with both public and private institutions catering to the demand generated by an environment of national development, and it was in the late 1960s that an initial movement towards a mass system of higher education was observed (Villa, 2003).

Societies that follow a human capital approach to education see higher education as an investment to become a more competitive nation. Researchers have long being interested in understanding non-completion in education, and although the study of dropout in higher education goes back to the 1930s, it did not become a common concern among colleges and universities until the late 1960s (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). A greater interest in the topic arose after a significant increase in the number of non-traditional students in higher education brought a change in the composition of the student body at this level of education. The most important change is observed in the increase of participation of students who are first-generation to access higher education, who come from middle and low-income households (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). At the same time, the world economy showed an important shift to urban areas and the industrialisation of the economy increased the demand for a more specialised workforce. Both characteristics in the student population and the shape of the economic activities can help explain the unprecedented boom for a place at university.

In the discussion of the role higher education plays in society, this chapter aims at directing that discussion to the context of Mexico. An overview of the higher education system in Mexico is presented, with references to the consequences of the expansion observed under policies of a mass higher education system. The chapter introduces a summary of the literature on access to higher education and more recently, although limited, the phenomenon of dropout and persistence in different regions in the country. Details on the tutorial programme (pastoral care scheme) promoted by the ANUIES and the

different scholarship programmes available to promote access and permanence in public

higher education are presented as an overview of the efforts made in the country to

approach dropout in higher education. Finally, this chapter introduces a brief overview of

the characteristics of the region where this study takes place. This helps as background

information to better understand the provision of higher education in the regions and the

characteristics of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL), the broader context

where this case study is located.

2.1 An overview of the organisation of higher education in Mexico

The higher education in Mexico is organised in six sub-systems, as presented in Table

2.1. Most public universities are autonomous, which means they have the right to appoint

their authorities and issue policies to run their organisation, limited by their own

constitutional laws. Autonomous universities are free to hire their academic and non-

academic staff, and observe academic freedom. The budget of public institutions comes to a

great extent from state and federal funds.

Table 2.1 Higher education system in Mexico

SUB-SYSTEM	DESCRIPTION
Public universities	Oriented to teaching, research, culture and provision of services
Institutes of technology	Oriented towards the industry
Technological universities	Offer two-year courses referred to as 'associate professionals'
'Other'	Diverse interests, covering approximately 1% of the population
Private institutions	Vary in orientation and size, and need the certification of other public universities, the state, or federal government to validate the degrees awarded
Normales	Teaching training college

Source: Elaborated by author

2.2 Expansion of higher education in Mexico

Mexico has 3,812 higher education institutions, 53% public and 46% private, serving

almost 3.5 million students (ANUIES, 2017). The importance of higher education is observed

in the public discourse of governments, higher education institutions, and public opinion,

which reiterates that higher education is a key element in fighting poverty and social

injustice (Vega, 2017). However, different actors approach success in higher education from

different perspectives, and the lack of a systematic monitoring of dropout and persistence

make it difficult to understand and solve this issue. Additionally, the expansion of higher

education in Mexico has witnessed the rise of disparities in the quality of education

provided by the growing number of institutions covering the demand for higher education,

and this has put assessment and quality assurance on top of the agenda (Vega, 2017).

The provision of higher education in Mexico is in a stage of mass coverage, using the

terms proposed by Trow (2010), who suggests coverage of higher education can be divided

in three stages: elite, when higher education participation is 15% or less of the relevant

population; mass, when the participation ranges between 15% and 50%, and universal,

when participation is above 50% of the population. Mexico City, the capital of the country,

reports higher education participation by young people ages 19 to 23 of 47.4%. Outside the

capital of the country, the state with the highest participation rate is Nuevo Leon, with

33.3% of its population ages 19 to 23 reported to be enrolled in higher education. The

national average rate is reported at 24.1%, making Nuevo Leon, the location the present

study, one of the most educated states in the country (INEGI, 2015).

There is great interest in increasing the coverage of provision of higher education as

unequivocal sign of social inclusion, and in order to achieve this goal, ANUIES (2017) has

presented the goal of reaching a coverage of 60% nationwide by the academic year 2021-

2022, considering not only face to face courses, but also online, open, and mixed modalities

of enrolment. This is a challenge for public higher education, as it is expected that two out

of three students will enrol in a public higher education institution. This situation means the responsibility to meet this goal will fall on the state, and not on private institutions. Public policies tend to emphasise efforts on the improvement of coverage of higher education for the case of states with the lowest coverage rates, yet Nuevo Leon do not escape the pressure to improve the provision of higher education.

Public universities and other institutions of higher education in Mexico are not subject to the marketization of higher education observed in recent years in the UK, students are not the client and universities do not centre their efforts on a service approach. However, additional government funding assigned to public higher education is determined by means of performativity practices, which highlight the evaluation of teaching and research performance of faculty members, and students' learning measured by more public, visual means, and no longer as a private individual process (Macfarlane, 2016). A growing emphasis on national and international teaching and learning quality assessments means institutional policies have to work on improving indicators, such as completion rates, and this scenario has raised interest in understanding dropout in public higher education in the recent years.

2.3 The challenge of non-completion in public higher education in Mexico

The study of non-completion in Mexico tends to adopt a dropout perspective, particularly in the context of public higher education institutions, as it is the student who is held accountable for the decision to continue in higher education. The absence of policies requiring institutions to systematically report the behaviour of student participation in higher education means data is not detailed, and this situation leads to inconclusive results. One example is found in statistics provided by ANUIES. In their statistics, the number of students who register for the first time in an undergraduate programme is reported, but there is no follow up by year, and the cohorts are made by adding the number of students

who start in an institution in a given year, and the number of students who complete their programme of studies five years later. Consequently, the reported number of students who complete their studies in a given year may include students who started their course over five years before the moment of completion. These apparent cohorts represent a problem of distortion to the analysis of the data from the institution's perspective, since entrance and completion numbers of real cohorts cannot be compared.

The definition of persistence is strongly bonded to the concept of time needed to complete a programme. In collecting data to define persistence, permanence in a programme could be limited to the minimum period of time required to, or it could consider all the time it takes to complete it, since many students may have to repeat years, delay their studies for personal reasons, reduce the number of courses taken per term and in turn adding time needed for completion. Since most theoretical models of retention assume that students are expected to complete their studies in a fixed period of time, individuals who do not fall within the expected time frame tend to distort the analysis. The consideration of the concept of *progression* is pertinent for many Mexican institutions, as students can complete their studies at a slower pace than expected, posing another challenge to the study of dropout in this context.

Additionally, an element to consider is the different needs and risks of non-completion faced by students of varied backgrounds enrolled in institutions with different characteristics. Studies conducted at national level lack detail in the reasons behind the decision of leaving the course, and even within the context of a single university, the differences posed by the demands of particular areas of study mean those macro studies fail to report in detail the experiences that build the decision of dropout. Mexico is a country of great contrasts, and this characteristic calls for more micro level research that explores the particularities of specific cases, and for the need to inform institutions to help them develop

bespoke strategies that will not only promote participation in higher education, but the achievement of the goal of completing a degree.

Existing literature on early leaving in the context of Mexican higher education finds course choice to be one of the most frequent reasons for leaving the course (Dzay-Chulim & Narvaez-Trejo, 2012) , together with economic difficulties that demand students to divert their time and efforts towards contributing to the household income. Altamira (1997) and De Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, and Hernández Saldaña (2011) identify students' disatisfaction with the quality of the course as the main reason to withdraw from the course. Chain Revuelta and Ramírez Muro (1997) followed a study of student pathways to track the progression of students enrolled in a public university in Mexico. Their work provides a detailed follow-up to students' final decision regarding their participation, and identifies dropouts, stop-overs, academic failure, lagging behind, and delayed course completion. Their work is based on following academic outcomes, so the decision is based on academic performance. The authors call for the need to develop systematic data collection to further this type of study, and identify the need to further research focused on identifying the causes behind those decisions.

For the Latin-American context evidence is found particularly from Colombia, Chile, and Mexico (De Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, & Hernández Saldaña, 2011; Diaz-Peralta, 2008; Donoso & Schiefelbein, 2007), with studies that focus on the analysis of the phenomenon in a broad institutional context following mainly Tinto's and Bean's models. However, those large-scale studies lack the micro perspective that helps understand what students face in deciding to leave the course, observing the particularities of courses that may escape the generalities presented by existing research.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no studies for the context of Mexico that focus on the study of the phenomenon of dropout in the field of economics, but for the case of medical education, an area considered of similar academic rigour and demand as the case

of economics. Empirical evidence from a public university (Hernández-Mata, Hernández-Castro, Nieto-Caraveo, & Hernández-Sierra, 2005) identifies two factors that explain dropout in the first year: (1) prior academic experience, where more prestigious high-schools prepare students with better study habits and sustained hard effort, and (2) academic buoyancy and tolerance to frustration. There is reference to faculty members as an influence on the decision, but no further discussion is provided in that regard. For the context of Colombia, Girón and González (2005) offer empirical evidence on the case of an undergraduate degree in economics at a small private catholic university. They find family support and previous academic experience to be the most influential factors on the decision to leave the course.

It is emphasised these factors are found in public institutions, and it is important to differentiate them from private ones, as their approach to non-completion obeys different reasons. Private universities have an additional incentive to promote the retention of their students in comparison to public institutions, because students are the most important source of income to fund the operations of the institutions.

2.4 Towards the promotion of permanence in higher education

Following the recommendations by ANUIES, a strategy proposed to target the high dropout rates observed nationwide was the student pastoral care programme called *programa de tutorías* (ANUIES, 2000; ANUIES, 2007). Being a recommendation and not a policy, it means institutions have the flexibility to decide whether to implement it or not and the conditions that frame those efforts. This pastoral care scheme provides an opportunity to establish a direct contact with students, a context to discuss challenges and barriers to completion, and the difficulties students face in the transition to university life (UANL, 2000). The objective of the programme is to accompany students in their transition to university through pastoral care, and to provide teaching staff with training to take this role,

which focuses mainly on assisting students with the transition process to university life, retain an interest in their personal and academic development as students, and to signpost and refer students to further assistance if necessary (ANUIES, 2000).

Despite being an institutional programme, the participation is not compulsory to all teaching academics. In order to encourage faculty members to participate in the programme, some institutions use a scheme through which academic staff are eligible to receive a financial incentive based on the academic activities conducted, other than teaching. Participation in *programa de tutorías* is acknowledged as part of the activities reported by academics participating in the national programme for the development of teaching faculty, PRODEP (Programa para el Desarrollo Profesional Docente), a government funded programme aimed at the development of full-time teaching staff in public higher education through financial support and incentives.

Efforts made in Mexico towards increasing the provision of higher education have promoted national programmes of social inclusion to offer financial support to promote participation in higher education among low socio-economic sectors (social program SEP-PROSPERA[5]). Federal and state scholarship programmes, together with institutional scholarship schemes, represent an opportunity to access financial support for the participation and permanence in higher education, or as an incentive for outstanding outcomes. The scholarships can be in the form of stipends or exemption of tuition fees. There are different schemes that will grant students either stipends or tuition scholarship regardless of their socioeconomic status. Three main types of 'talent' are awarded this type of support: academic excellence, athletic, and artistic, all subject to reporting satisfactory academic outcomes. There are social programmes aimed at promoting access and permanence of students from less privileged groups in society. SEP-PROSPERA and

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[5] A programme addressed at first year students enrolling for the first time in any undergraduate programme in public higher education. (SEP, 2017)

Manutención are federal programmes that prioritise financial support to the most

marginalised groups in society[6].

2.5 The regional context of study: Nuevo León

Four different regions can be identified in Mexico: centre, north, south and centre-

north. Wide differences in the social, cultural, and economic composition of each region

generate great disparities, and evidence shows that human capital plays an important role

in the generation of those disparities (Rodríguez-Oreggia, 2005). Figure 2.1 shows a map

that identifies the northern states along the border with the USA as winners of the process

of trade opening, strongly influenced by the location of manufacturing firms.

Figure 2.1 Regionalised growth in Mexico
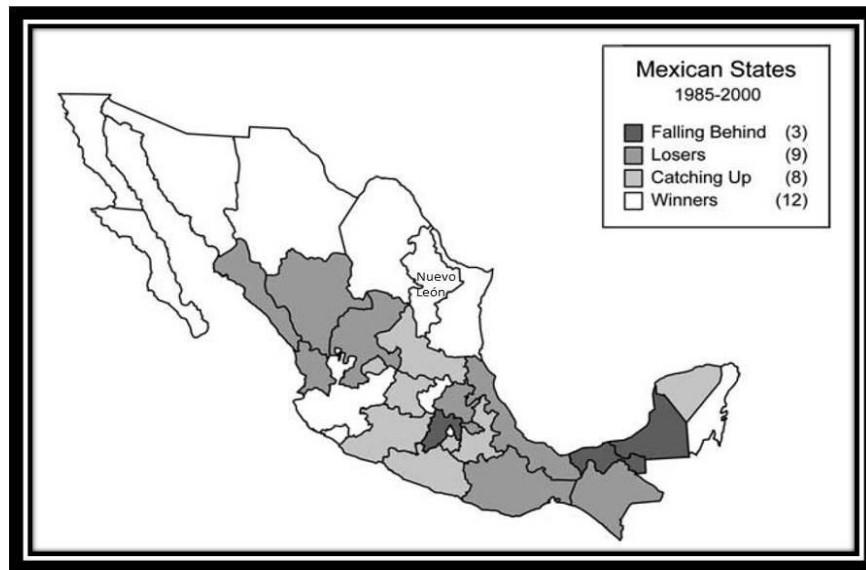
Source: Rodríguez-Oreggia, (2005)

Mexico comprises 31 states and the capital, Mexico City. Nuevo León is located in the

north-eastern region of the country, and it covers 3.3% of the national territory. It is one of

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[6] Priority is given to indigenous communities, victims of crime, single mothers and students from families who earn less than 4 minimum-wages. The yearly amount granted of $11,000 Mx pesos equals approximately to half on one minimum-wage. (CONEVAL, 2017)

the six states along the border with the USA, and an important place for international business. The total population is over 4.6 million inhabitants, making it the 8th most populated entity in the country. The main economic sectors are food, beverage (with international presence in beer and soft drink industries), cement, steel, automotive, chemicals, gas, glass, financial services, and educational institutions. There are about 100 industrial parks in the state, with many well-established international companies. The state has a developed infrastructure and provision of utilities well above the national average, even in rural areas.

Regarding the population of the state, the ethnic background is predominantly white, and according to the most recent census (INEGI, 2010), men and women are almost equally represented, 49.8% and 50.2% respectively. In Nuevo León only 1% of the population speaks an indigenous language (most widely spoken are náhuatl, huasteco and otomi), and 3.7% of the population has recently moved into the state. The median age of inhabitants is 27, and it is the second most literate state in the country, after Mexico City, with an average schooling of 9.8 years (1.2 years above the national mean). The Human Development Index (HDI) is the second highest in the country, only second to Mexico City. The state is divided into 51 municipalities, and the capital city, Monterrey, is considered the industrial capital of the country.

The metropolitan area of Monterrey makes 88% of the total population of the state (3.7 million), representing the third biggest metropolitan area in Mexico, only after Mexico City and Guadalajara metropolitan area. Regarding economic activity, the metropolitan area of Monterrey is specialised in six out of eight sectors of intensive use of knowledge, namely chemical industry; metal mechanical industry; electronic and electric industry; automotive and spare parts industry; other manufacturing; mass media; financial and real estate services; and professional, scientific and technical services (CONAPO, 2011). The

dynamic economy in the area and the competitive labour market are some of the reasons that explain the importance of higher education in the region.

2.5.1 Higher education in Monterrey, Nuevo León

Nuevo León is home to 1% of the total of institutions of higher education in the country, all of them located in the metropolitan area of Monterrey. There are six public institutions, the largest and most important is the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL). In 2017, enrolment reached nearly 190,000 students, about 83,000 in undergraduate programmes. As for the private sector, the two most important higher education institutions in the state are the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education (ITESM) and Universidad de Monterrey. The ITESM, created in 1944, is known for its international prestige and a reputation as an innovative and leading institution. It has evolved into a System, comprising Tecnológico de Monterrey; Universidad TecVirtual; Universidad TecMilenio; and TecSalud. Two other institution in the city are the Universidad de Monterrey, a private catholic university that offers studies at high-school, undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and the Universidad Regiomontana, a small university characterised by high admission rates, and flexibility of timetables, a characteristic that allows students to combine studies with work and other responsibilities.

2.5.2 Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo Leon

Founded in 1933, the UANL is a public research university comprised by 31 high-schools (feeder schools), 26 schools, 25 postgraduate schools and 37 research centres, most of which offer more than one programme of study in undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The total of programmes of study offered at the UANL add up 31 vocational degrees, 91 undergraduate degrees, 47 specializations, 117 masters' degrees, and 43 doctoral degrees. With nearly 190,000 students enrolled in 2017, it has a consolidated reputation as

the most important public university in the Northeast and among the top 5 universities in

the country (UNAM, 2016). Its budget is comprised of federal funds (66%), state funds

(24%), and the income derived from services provided by the university, including fees paid

by students (10%)[7].

Being an autonomous institution, the state has no inference in the strategic direction

of the university, and the decisions on the programmes of study are decided within the

institution, without the need for authorisation from external organisations, as in the case of

non-autonomous institutions, which are subject to the approval of the Minister of

Education. As a member of ANUIES, the UANL follows the recommendations of the

implementation of strategies to prevent student dropout. The institutional programme with

this aim is the *Programa de Tutorias.* This programme is coordinated by the *Dirección de*

Formación Integral al Estudiante UANL, which also supports *course-choice guidance* efforts

in the high-schools which are part of the UANL system.

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[7] http://transparencia.uanl.mx/informacion_presupuestal/presupuesto_2017/archivos/presupuesto_2017.pdf
(Retrieved 20 September 2017)

Summary

This chapter introduces an overview of the organisation of the higher education system in Mexico, the challenges of the expansion it is undergoing and the limited efforts to promote persistence in public higher education Mexico. Higher education holds the promise of social mobility, and a socio-economic improvement at a national level, this makes dropout an issue of national interest. However, the expansion of the higher educational system requires efforts to be mostly focused on the assurance of quality, and the approach to reducing dropout is limited.

Public higher education institutions in Mexico are not subject to the marketization of higher education observed in international settings, students do not receive the treatment of clients and universities do not centre their efforts on a service approach. However, an emphasis on quality assessments means institutional policies have to work on improving indicators, such as completion rates, and this scenario has brought attention to the study of dropout in the national context in recent years.

The study of the phenomenon of dropout in higher education in Mexico faces systematic challenges. The lack of a standardised definition of dropout represents a difficulty to overcome in order to produce reliable statistics to analyse the problem. Additionally, the differences in the challenges that higher education faces in different regions of the country make it difficult to obtain an analysis that can be generalised to a context such as the one presented in this study.

An overview of efforts towards reducing dropout at national scale were introduced, with financial aid and tutorial support suggested as strategies to support students at risk. Finally, to expand the contextualisation of the study, a brief introduction to the characteristics of the region and the University where the present study is located was presented. -

3. Methodology, Research Design and Methods

This chapter presents the methodology and methods used in the study, the research questions in detail, and how they are addressed. The aim of this research is to understand how students experience the decision to stay or leave a course, and to explore academics' perspective on what influences students in making that decision. The methodology chosen to conduct this research was adopted to facilitate the expression of students' experiences and views, as my interest is to put the student perspective at the core of the understanding of the barriers and facilitators to completion. The way students experience their life at university depends to a great extent on their personal perception and the influence of elements that go beyond the institution; however, I to explore how the institution, represented by academics, contribute to shape that experience.

3.1 Methodology

According to Creswell (2003), ontology is the claim researchers make regarding knowledge, epistemology is how individuals have arrived at that knowledge, and methodology is the process of studying it. In the following subsections, I discuss the position I have taken to conduct this study and shall discuss in detail the methodology that guides my research.

The objective of this study is to capture personal dimensions of the experience of students facing the decision to stay or leave a particular course characterised by academic elitism and a high dropout rate. My study takes account of the relationship between the individual experience and the institutional and cultural context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), and it aims at gaining a better understanding of what lays behind the decision to stay or leave the course.

3.1.1 Narrative mode

Bruner (1986) presents two modes of thought used to interpret and understand the world and the experiences within, a paradigmatic mode and a narrative mode. The paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode of thought draws on a mathematical, reasoned analysis, logical proof and empirical observation to explain a cause-effect relationship, to predict outcomes and create an objective truth that can be subject to test in order to be proved or disproved. The narrative mode is concerned with experiences shared by individuals, with meaning constructed through those accounts. Both modes present areas of strength, with the paradigmatic mode focusing on predicting and testing hypothesis of the observed reality, and the narrative mode being able to approach the ambiguous and complex elements of human life, organising it in a meaningful way.

The present study does not aim at presenting an absolute truth, but offers a pluralist position based on critical reflection of reality and how it is experienced by individuals. Hence, knowledge derived from this research is socially constructed, with interactions and experiences at the centre of the development of knowledge.

3.1.2 Ontological considerations

The nature of the world and what is there to know is what ontological concerns refer to. My research is designed with an ontological view that assumes the phenomenon being studied is complex, where contingencies are inevitable (Gube & Lincoln, 1994), and it emphasises the diversity of interpretations that can be given to the world, making my position a relativist one (Willig, 2013). The aim of this study is to explore the perception of a reality faced by participants, and the research questions are approached based on the interpretation of those experiences. The decision to use a qualitative approach to explore individual accounts of an experience obeys the interest in exploring an in-depth insight into individual meanings of a complex multifactorial issue, from a phenomenological perspective.

3.1.3 Epistemological considerations

Epistemology refers to what constitutes valid knowledge and how it is obtained. McLeod (2011) suggests the nature of qualitative research is incomplete and cannot claim to be an absolute truth, yet it has the richness of being situated in context, in real life. Under an interpretative perspective, Rennie (2012) argues the reliability and validity of research depends on a systematic, transparent approach to interpretation, and the disclosure of the researcher's perspective. Therefore, I provide the reader with detailed procedural information and reflexivity to make the process of my research as transparent as possible, and assure the reader the effort put in building reliability around my study.

The objective of this study is to explore experiences, and for that reason it is of prime interest to understand why students leave the course, how students who stay get to overcome barriers to completion, if they face any, and how students who are currently enrolled can help us understand the process of earning membership of academic elitism. In order to understand the institutional position on the phenomenon of historically high dropout rates, the perception of academics is also explored. Overall, this research gives a voice to students, it captures the impact of the relationship between academics and students on the phenomenon of non-completion, and explains how the School *habitus* has an influence on the decision to stay or leave the course, beyond the most frequent reason used to justify the decision to leave, i.e. poor academic performance.

In my study, I see individual experience as a product of interpretation, it is flexible and constructed, yet real to those who have that experience (Willig, 2013), and for this reason I am adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, a decision that will be discussed in detail further in this chapter. First, I proceed to discuss my role as the researcher, an exercise that will help the reader gain a clearer perspective of how I build knowledge in conducting this study.

3.1.4 Reflexivity

My role in this research has not been one of a neutral observer. The way data collected has been subject to my own interpretations, and the decisions I made on the chosen approach to conduct this research require accountability and responsibility for those decisions and actions. Willig notes the need to acknowledge "an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings" (2013, p. 10), and observes two notions of reflexivity. The first notion is a personal one, related to the values, experiences and interests of the researcher, and how they shape the research, as well as the impact research has on the researcher. The second one is an epistemological reflexivity, which presents the question of how a different understanding could have been reached if a different research design had been chosen.

Regarding personal reflexivity, this notion includes my own experience as a former student who left the course in my early youth, and my role as a lecturer, both in the same School under study. My background means I am close to academics involved in the study, and close to some of the students who participated as well. I also observe the impact of my gender, as it is noted women in higher education tend to observe more caring roles, compared to male academics (Lynch, 2010). Finally, being a non-economist lecturer with a limited role in the shaping of institutional policies that affect the approach the school adopts towards student dropout and retention means my position as academic is of a lower impact compared to senior lecturers and professors teaching core modules in the programme.

Having a shared experience with participants, and being a member of the community where the research takes place gives me the status of an insider researcher (Kanuha, 2000). Despite the possible bias that my knowledge of the context and my own experience of the phenomenon can bring to my research, I find a positive outcome of this status, as I was able

to generate an honest rapport with participants, and used my knowledge of the context of study to explore in depth elements that an outsider could have overseen.

It became clear to me, throughout the stage of writing up this thesis, that my interest in researching barriers to completion and how students faced them in the decision of staying or leaving the course followed a personal interest in wanting to explore how academics and students perceive and experience a decision that for me had a deep personal impact, and an urge to share my findings with the institution in order to provide a better understanding of this phenomenon, and promote a more empathetic attitude towards the problem under study. This research has given me the opportunity to see a known situation with different eyes, and to become aware of the risks of normalising detrimental practices that become invisible in everyday life.

3.1.5 Interpretative phenomenology

Phenomenology is used extensively in research emanating from sociology, psychology, health sciences, and education (Creswell, 2012). Phenomenological approaches can be descriptive, interested in capturing the experience as it is, based entirely on the accounts reported by participants; or interpretative, where the researchers aims at understanding the meaning of an experience, as she "seeks to also understand the meaning of an account of experience by stepping outside of the account and reflecting upon its status as an account and its wider (social, cultural, psychological) meanings" (Willig, 2013, p. 73). A summary of the advantages and disadvantages of an interpretative approach is presented in Table 3.1

My research links the phenomenon with the wider social, economic and cultural structures within which students experience higher education, and the school practices that set expectations identified by participants. By using an interpretative approach, my objective is to generate knowledge around how students and academics experience a

phenomenon of a complex multifactorial nature, and how those experiences help construct the meaning that the experience of deciding whether to stay or leave the course has within a particular social and cultural context. Within the umbrella of a phenomenological approach, I choose to use thematic analysis as my analytic method, and in doing so I engage in a process 'to reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface of *reality*' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81)

Table 3.1. Advantages and disadvantages of an interpretative approach

INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH	
ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Facilitates understanding of how and why as experienced by participants	Collecting rich and exhaustive data requires communication skills and time.
Good at understanding social processes from diverse perspectives	Clear patterns cannot be reached
Allows for complexity and contextual factors to understand meaning of experiences	Data analysis is challenging and can be complex, there is a risk of being only descriptive

Source: Elaborated by author with information from Willig (2013)

The interpretative nature of the chosen approach gives me, as the researcher, an active role in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and in turn this role makes my findings subjective; however, wider implications can be achieved using this approach, allowing my research to add to knowledge through contextualised contributions to theory (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Different from mainstream research on dropout and persistence, based on paradigmatic modes of building knowledge, my choice of using an interpretative approach aims to highlight that students' complex nature encompasses more than can actually be captured through quantitative data and variables bounded to overgeneralised definitions.

3.1.6 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is described as an analytic method aimed at uncovering patters of meaning in information obtained from experiences of individuals (McLeod, 2001 p. 145). Yet, the role of the researcher should not be minimised, as her active role determines what patters are considered as more relevant, and are reported to the readers. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise the importance of the role played by the position of the researcher, and the theoretical perspective and values she brings to the analysis.

I decided to use thematic analysis under an interpretative approach, as the exploration of data in my research is conducted using different theoretical frameworks and is not wedded to any pre-existing one. In conducting the analysis of data, the information provided by participants is taken as true accounts of their perception of the experience, and it serves to challenge existing theories in order to build an understanding of a problem using the perspective of different actors involved in the phenomenon.

In my analysis, I go beyond a description of what participants report, and conduct an analysis to construct knowledge around existing theories. For the analysis of data, I follow six phases of the thematic analysis process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis follows a nonlinear recursive process, and in the stages of data collection, data analysis and producing the report, I moved back and forth the phases as needed.

Phase 1. Familiarise yourself with the data: Since I personally conducted the interviews, I had the advantage of having prior knowledge of the data. Additionally, I personally transcribed and translated interviews, a process that implied repeated reading, allowing me to be completely immersed in the data.

Phase 2. Generating initial codes: For this phase, my approach was theory driven, as I approached data bearing in mind theories on dropout and retention, and the semi-structured interviews helped in this phase, as the questions were organised by barriers found in the literature, giving participants the opportunity to elaborate on elements

known in the study of dropout and persistence, and the possibility to explore aspects not included in the literature. I conducted coding through the use of NVivo, a strategy that made it practical to keep the text that surrounds data coded at hand, helping to keep the information in context.

Phase 3. Searching for themes: In this phase, data was coded and collated. My research is theory guided, hence I guided the themes used to organise my data and developed conceptual maps as an instrument to help me visualise the connections and combinations of codes and themes. At this stage, nine provisional themes served as a reference to continue with the analysis.

Phase 4. Reviewing themes: In this phase, coherent patterns were observed in the data assigned to each provisional theme, and as a result, data was re-read and re-coded several times until the themes were reduced to four main themes that helped build a comprehensive story to approach the study. Phase 5 was merged in too.

Phase 5. Defining and naming themes: This was the phase of 'define and refine' themes. For this phase, I started by bringing extracts linked to a theme together to put together the story my data had to tell in order to answer research questions. An initial writing of the analysis for each extract was conducted, and in doing so, names for themes were decided.

Phase 6. Producing the report: The writing up of the analysis was conducted in this stage, bringing together the data and analysis in a coherent, logical and informed way I worked rigorously in making my argument in relation to the research questions.

3.1.7 Case study

Researchers interested in understanding a phenomenon in its real-world setting favour the use of the case study. Although a consensus is not reached on whether it is a method (Yin, 2014) or an object of study (Stake, 1995), case study offers the particular

perspective of an in-depth description of a phenomenon, regardless of the methods of inquiry chosen by the researcher.

Case study research acknowledges the fact that the influence of the context on the phenomenon is not clear cut, hence the importance of conducting the study within the setting where the case occurs as it takes place (Yin, 2014), something that represents an advantage in using a qualitative approach, given the possibility to describe data within the context of occurrence and the possibility to explain the complexities of real life situations in detail. Stake (1995) highlights the benefits of qualitative case study methodology arising from its emphasis on the uniqueness of each case, and the subjective experience of individuals involved in that case.

When using case study, researchers have the flexibility to combine different methods of inquiry in order to analyse the case from different perspectives, and having a particular unit to study allows the researcher to annotate particularities and work towards the construction of knowledge based on the analysis of data obtained (Merriam, 2014). Moreover, case study research allows an intensive investigation of the characteristics of a rather small number of accounts, and comparing and contrasting them allows researchers to learn significant features of the phenomenon, and how it varies under differences conditions.

My research observes how participants experience a decision that does not occur in a single moment in time, but is observed as a process over time, and case study is particularly well suited to investigate processes (Yin, 2014). Some longitudinal studies of individual subjects rely on qualitative data from journal writings, which give descriptive accounts of behaviour. Based on the nature of what a case study examines, there are three types identified in the literature: intrinsic, instrumental and collective types of case studies (Stake, 1995), with the possibility of using quantitative and/or qualitative analyses of the data in any of the three. The aim of this study is to explore how a phenomenon is experienced in a specific context, and not to establish a causal explanation of barriers as predictors of a decision in

general. Hence, a qualitative and interpretive approach seems to suit best my research objective, following an instrumental type of case study, which aims at reaching generalisations of findings to larger populations in contexts with shared characteristics.

Even though case studies offer the advantage of the microanalysis of social problems, some disadvantages are noted. First of all, case study is regarded as lacking rigour, particularly because of the influence the researcher has on how research is conducted (Yin, 2014). As I have stated before, I attempt to make the process of conducting my research as transparent as possible to provide my audience with enough reference of my position as researcher. Another criticisms falls on the impossibility to reach generalisable conclusions, as case study is based on a small sample, and on the resources in terms of time and systematic organisation required to manage the large amounts of information produced. Suggestions for the design of research under an interpretative approach are observed in the design of this study, as proposed by Creswell (2012). His recommendation are summarised in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Research design under an interpretative approach

INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH
• A phenomenon of interest to study is identified
• The researcher recognizes and specifies the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology
• Data are collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon
• Participants are asked two brad, general questions: what have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What context or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?
• Data analysis occurs through organised "clusters of meaning" and from these clusters evolves both textual and structural descriptions of the experience which leads to a composite description that presents the "essence" of the phenomenon

Source: Elaborated by author with information from Creswell (2012)

Bearing in mind the elements discussed in the subsections above, I have chosen to follow an interpretative approach, using a holistic case study design to conduct the present study. In the following subsections, I shall discuss the selection of the case and data analysis.

3.2 Selection of School

The decision to conduct the research at the School of Economics, UANL is based on my awareness of the problem observed in this context, and the lack of research conducted in contexts of academic elitism with high dropout rates. Every year, about 120 students start their undergraduate course, and after nine semesters an average of 17 students graduate. Despite the low numbers of attainment, the School has not regarded it as an unusual situation, as it has been the accepted norm for decades.

The organisation of the undergraduate courses is by semesters, which consists of terms of 20 weeks, 15 of them dedicated to teaching. New cohorts are enrolled in August each year. The course is organised in a modular scheme, and students are expected to pass the 47 modules that make the whole course in a timeframe of nine semesters. At the time of completion of this thesis, the School was working on the elaboration of statistical indicators to identify the pathways of students who did not graduate within the nine semesters of the expected duration of the course. Based on data provided by the school, the number of students who leave the course in the first year tend to represent half of the cohort, yet the number of students who withdraw continue to increase in the second and third year, as observed in Figure 3.1 for cohorts 2014 and below. The data available does not show the behaviour of dropout for the 2015 cohort because it was retrieved three weeks after the start of their academic year, yet in that time three students had already decided to leave the course.

Being part of a public university under a mass higher education system, the School attracts a diverse socioeconomic student body, and because it is ranked as the top two undergraduate degree in Economics in the country, it attracts students with academic backgrounds of high achievement. Few institutions share such characteristics and no empirical evidence exists on the study of persistence and non-completion among students in an institution of this kind in Mexico.

Figure 3.1 Student intake, completion within timeframe, and students enrolled at the School of Economics for cohorts 2006 to 2015
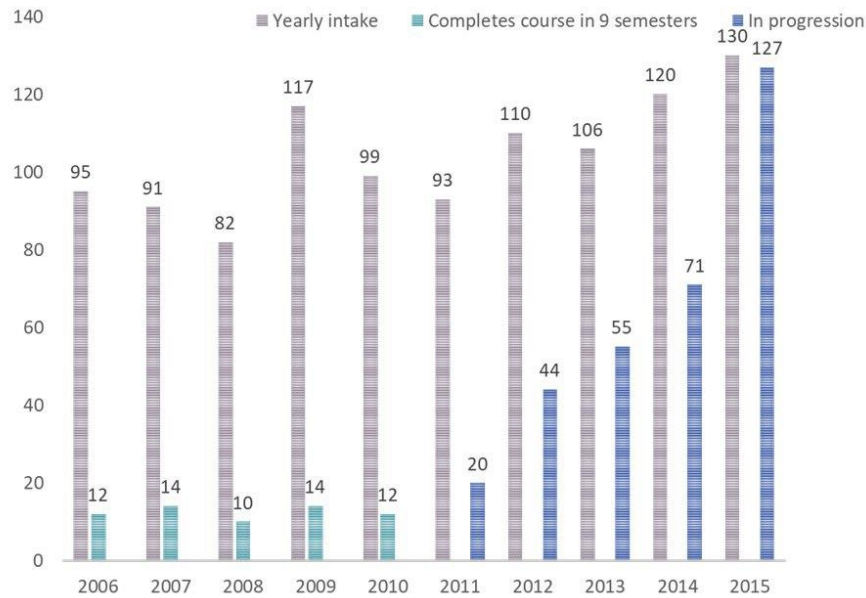
Source: Elaborated by author with data from the School of Economics

The School of Economics is known as a flagship school at the UANL, and the prestige of its undergraduate course in economics has been consolidated by means of national and international certifications. The vision statement of the School aims at being recognised as one of the best schools of economics in Latin America. The programme follows a curriculum based on mainstream economics, 'with a strong dominance of neoclassical theories and a rigorous quantitative approach' (Duval-Hernández & Villagomez, 2011, p. 91). The strong mathematical approach of the course is a feature that tends to attract students with high academic standards and an interest in mathematics, which has been associated in literature to higher levels of socioeconomic background, *cultural capital*, and grade level (Gilleece, Cosgrave, & Sofroniou, 2010). Most of the texts used in the course are used in U.S. programmes, academics favour a mathematical rigorous approach, and the School is one of three in the country with a high percentage of alumni (above 50 percent) who choose to get a postgraduate degree (Ahumada & Butler, 2009).

In order to be admitted to this school, applicants take the general admissions exam used for all the courses at UANL, the difference being the score required to get a place in this programme is among the highest in this university, compared to the requirements for the Medical School. Additional to the general admissions exam, students are required to take an internal admission exams to evaluate their mathematical skills. A diagnostic test on proficiency in English as a foreign language is also administered, but only for level placement purposes. The School sets a minimum score for the mathematics test and applicants who do not pass with a minimum of 70% have to take a propaedeutic module prior to the start of the academic year. At the end of the propaedeutic module a second exam is administered, and a place is offered to those students who reach a satisfactory score in both the general admissions exam and the mathematics exam. Based on information provided by the school, about 70% of applicants end up taking the mathematics propaedeutic module, a situation that indicates the gap in prior preparation in mathematics and the level expected by the standard of the School.

The School reputation comes from a curriculum of quantitative rigour, from alumni who have consolidated positions of influence not only in Mexico but abroad, and who have gained postgraduate degrees from prestigious institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, to mention a few. Most faculty members hold a doctorate degree from prestigious institutions abroad, and the School identifies itself as an institution of high academic rigour, when compared to other schools within the university and other departments of economics in the country. Regarding standard evaluations, students have consistently achieved outstanding scores in *EGEL Economía*[8], a standardised national exit evaluation that measures knowledge and academic skills in the area of economics in Mexico. The course has been certified as a Level 1 undergraduate programme by the *CIEES*[9] and it has

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[8] EGEL Economia is administered by the National Centre for Assessment in Higher Education (CENEVAL)

[9] Interinstitutional Committee for the Assessment of Higher Education (CIEES)

been certified by the CONACE (National Council for the Certification of the Economic Science), a member of the Council for the Certification of Higher Education.

Based on the information made available through their website, the School of Economics makes an effort in promoting itself as a place where dedication and hard work are valuable assets, where prospective students are expected to bring a set of specific skills, as observed in the description of the prospective student profile:

> *Students interested in being admitted at the School of Economics, UANL should have the following characteristics: critical spirit, quantitative skills, analytical capacity, work discipline, high sense of responsibility, verbal coherence, sensitivity to social problems, and interest in research. (UANL, 2016)*

Additional to the information regarding student profile, the School website provides a brief description of what can be expected in terms of time demanded to complete coursework, and the teaching methods used in the course:

> *Teaching methods are based on student independent work, using a supplementary system of sessions called laboratorios, where sets of problems are solved and the module materials are put into practice. Those sessions are run by the most outstanding students from higher semesters, called laboratoristas. Timetable is not organised in shifts, as there is only one group for each module. Only first year modules are an exception, generally organised in two groups per module. Hence, it is necessary for students to be dedicated full-time to their studies, because sessions are scheduled mornings and afternoons, in addition to laboratorios. The average time a student spends in the classroom in the first semesters is about 39 to 49 hours per week.[10] (UANL, 2016)*

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[10] School of Economics website, retrieved 1 February 2016 http://www.economia.uanl.mx/plan-de-estudios/

Laboratorios are mandatory sessions that complement some modules of the undergraduate course and are usually worth ten percent of the final mark of the module. Students get credits for attending and completing the problem sets provided in the sessions, which are run for modules with a quantitative component, such as mathematics, calculus, microeconomics, and econometrics, and for the module in language and communication (Spanish). A student-peer from a higher semester, known as *laboratorista,* runs the sessions as part of their internship mandatory programme, or simply to gain teaching experience, and in exchange they get a scholarship that covers their tuition fee for the semester they participate in the scheme. Traditionally, *laboratoristas* must be students who have excelled in the module they will assist, and they will discuss the content of the sessions with lecturers, although students report this is not always the case.

The institution has well established practices to inform prospective students about the contents of the programme, and what to expect from the course. Those practices include informative visits to top feeder high-schools, and information sessions open to prospective students and their parents. Time and again, those sessions highlight the element of academic rigour and the time demands of the course.

This study presents the case of a School that identifies as highly rigorous, with practices of academic elitism within an institution under a mass higher education system. The concept of academic elitism is understood in terms of selectivity and rigour, with high expectations of time required to complete academic work (Arum & Roksa, 2011). An identified challenge of mass higher education is the growing number of students to be educated, the less-homogeneous characteristics of student population, and changes in the academic profession (Altbach, 1999), whereas elite education refers to a type of education not only in terms of the privileged social origin of students, or the nature of the contents studied, such as the classics, fine arts, or mathematics, but in terms of 'the levels of intensity and complexity at which the subject is pursued' (Trow, 1976, p. 335).

3.3 Research design and methods

Previous research on the topic of dropout and retention emphasizes the relevance of the first year as the critical period when most withdrawals take place (Tinto, 1993; Yorke and Longden, 2004), but research on the reasons that drive the decision in later years is limited. Literature indicates that persistence can only be observed once students have completed their programme of studies (Seidman, 2012), and given the challenges of collecting data of completion of studies, few empirical studies have explored the similarities or differences between the experiences that accompany the decision to stay or leave among students in the first year and students who succeed in completing their studies.

3.3.1 Research questions

This study aims at exploring in depth the barriers and facilitators to persist and complete a course in the context of academic elitism in a mass higher education system. In order to gain a comprehensive perspective, this study proposes approaching four different types of participants that will help in the construction of an understanding of the phenomenon.

The first group consists of students who left the course. Participants in this group represent a variety of scenarios and barriers to completion, and their experience provides evidence to explore what is behind the decision to leave. The stories they shared helped me build a framework to explain dropout in the context of a highly rigorous academic environment.

Secondly, I addressed students who succeeded and graduated from this course. In exploring their experiences, I paid particular attention to identify if they had faced barriers to completion, either similar or different to those reported by *leavers*, and the facilitators to overcome such barriers and persist. Emphasis was placed on what worked for them in order to complete the course.

Because students who left and those who have graduated offer a retrospective account of their experience, I include the perspective of those currently enrolled in the course to explore a vivid account of the process to gain membership of academic elitism in the pursuit of course completion. Finally, because literature on dropout and retention makes great emphasis on the role of academics and the institution on the student decision, I considered it valuable to approach academics' perception of dropout and their perception of the role they play on students' decision to stay or leave the course. The research questions that guide my study are:

Q1. Why do students leave the course? And more specifically, how do students in this context experience barriers to completion?

Q2. How do students who graduate overcome barriers to completion?

Q3. How do students currently enrolled in the course develop what it takes to earn their membership?

Q4. How do faculty members perceive dropout in this School and their role in students' decision to stay or leave the course?

3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

In order to answer those questions, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted aiming at obtaining rich data based on the experiences of participants. It was a purpose of the interview to encouraging participants to elaborate their account on their experience of the School and particularly in facing barriers to completion, as it is the purpose of interviews to show an interest in the lived experiences of others and how they make meaning of those experiences (Seidman, 2006). Qualitative interviews lasting between 60 to 90 minutes with students and between 40 and 70 minutes with faculty members were conducted face to face and via video conferencing for the case of some students who left the course and were not geographically at reach. All interviews with '*students in progression*' and

with faculty members were conducted at the School of Economics in September 2015, except for three faculty members who opted to provide their answers in writing. Interviews with '*leavers*' and '*persisters*' were held at the participants' convenience in places that would facilitate a quiet environment for the interview, for both the face-to-face and the video-call interviews.

Two different strategies were used in the stage of data collection. The recruitment of *leavers* was conducted through a purposeful sampling technique. They were contacted by email and social media to invite them to participate. Some were students I had known, others were contacted through the School. To the extent of possibilities, interviews were conducted face to face on two different field trips, in January and September 2015, while others were conducted through video conference. Students who graduated were contacted via social media, following the page of the School that connects with alumni. For the recruitment of students currently enrolled in the course, I visited three classes where most students are enrolled in the third, fifth and seventh semester. I explained the purpose of my research and invited students to participate. Interviews were conducted in a private study room in the library to provide students with privacy within the premises of School.

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, as they provide the opportunity to reflect in a guided way on research questions. Data is rich because the researcher can guide participants to focus on points of interest in the limited time available for the interview. Questions in the interview were guided by nine classifications of barriers to completion based on what is found in literature (see Chapter One, section 1.2). The interview guide used to conduct interviews with students can be found in Appendix 2, and the guide for interviews with faculty members in Appendix 3. The barriers used as reference were: academic background, motivation to enrol, transition to HE, social and academic integration, expectations and satisfactions, home factors, individual based factors and emotional elements, and the theme map for these barriers can be found in Appendix 4.

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In conducting interviews with students who have left the course, and bearing in mind this could represent an uncomfortable experience, I observed a guidance following (Seidman, 2006), which is summarised in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Interview guidance

STAGE	INTEREVIEW ISSUES AND GUIDANCE
Before the interview	• Ethic forms and consent form approval • Students who left the course may feel anxious about discussing their experience, as it is associated with a sense of failure
Planning the interview	• Contact students and invite them to participate • Prioritise interviews with *leavers*, may not be motivated to participate, depending on their personal experience
In the interview	• Create an environment that helps reduce anxiety • When direct prompts needed, avoid forced choice questions • Reduce social distance

Source: Elaborated by author with information from Seidman (2006)

3.3.3 Participants

A total of sixty five participants took part in this study, divided in four groups: '*leavers*' (12), '*persisters*' (10), '*students in progression*' (23), and faculty members (20). Students recruited for the study were members of cohorts from 2006 to 2014, since the 2005 and before cohorts followed a different curriculum and their experience would present differences that could distort the results obtained. I aimed at interviewing those lecturers who interact with most students and have the largest classes; this only excluded lecturers who teach elective modules in the last year, who have limited first-hand interaction with students at risk of dropout.

Leavers

The negative social stigma associated to dropout represents a challenge to data collection amongst students who have left the course. Data for this analysis was obtained

through the voluntary participation of twelve former students who enrolled in the undergraduate course of Economics at the UANL between 2007 and 2014 and left the course. The years spent in the course do not reflect the progression they made, as some students spent over three years but did not manage to progress in modules beyond the second academic year.

Most students come directly from high schools that belong to the same university system, feeder schools, and some of those schools are identified as top schools based on the better academic preparation observed in their graduates. The information on top marks was self-reported Table 3.4 summarises the main characteristics of student who left the course.

Persisters

Persisters were contacted via social media, following the page of the School that connects with alumni. All of them knew me in advance, and having a positive interaction with them at their time as students helped create a good rapport. Only four participants, Natalia, Nicolás, Ana and Adriana graduated within the timeframe set by the institution to get the degree, the rest lagged behind due to academic struggle, and spent from six to twelve extra months to complete the programme. Seven out of ten participants in this study enrolled on the programme at age 17, meaning they were legally considered minors and under legal responsibility of their parents according to laws in Mexico. Table 3.5 summarises the main characteristics of students who left the course.

Students in progression

To recruit participants of this group, I spent three weeks conducting interviews face to face. Lecturers allowed me to introduce myself and my research to the whole class and students were invited to book a time for an interview. The response was overwhelming and

I managed to interview 23 students who volunteered to share their experiences. To provide privacy and for students' convenience, interviews were conducted in a private study room at the library. Table 3.6 summarises the main characteristics of *students in progression*.

Table 3.4 Characteristics of leavers

Name	Time of departure	School of origin	Frist Gen or Traditional	Local or Non-Local	Top marks in high school	Follow up in different course
Ricardo	Y2	Feeder	FG	Local	No	Withdrew
Daniel	Y1	Top feeder	FG	Local	No	Graduated
Alberto	Y2	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	Graduated
Esther	Y1	Non feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	Graduated
Israel	Y2	Top feeder	T	Local	No	In Progress
Raquel	Y3	Non feeder	T	Local	Yes	Graduated
Alba	Y2	Feeder	FG	Local	No	Graduated
Hilda	Y3	Top feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Graduated
Ignacio	Y1	Non-feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	In Progress
Diana	Y2	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	Withdrew
Ada	Y1	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	In Progress
Renata	Y3	Non-feeder	T	Local	Yes	Graduated

Source: Elaborated by author with information from the interviews

Table 3.5 Characteristics of persisters

Name	School of origin	Frist Gen or Traditional	Local or Non-Local	Top marks in high school	Graduated in 9 semesters
Roberto	Feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Yes
Sandra	Feeder	FG	Local	Yes	No
Elisa	Non-feeder	FG	Non-local	Yes	No
Oscar	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	No
Natalia	Non-feeder	FG	Non-local	Yes	Yes
Nicolás	Non-feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	Yes
Ana	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	Yes
Marco	Feeder	FG	Local	Yes	No
David	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	No
Adriana	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	Yes

Source: Elaborated by author with information from the interviews

Table 3.6 Characteristics of students in progression

Name	Year of enrolment	School of origin	Frist Gen or Traditional	Local or Non-local	Top marks HS	Follow up
Nelly	2014	Feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Progress
Eduardo	2014	Feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Progress
Saul	2014	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	Progress
Norma	2014	Top feeder	T	Local	Yes	Progress
Rafael	2014	Non-feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	Progress
César	2014	Non-feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	Progress
Cristobal	2013	Feeder	T	Local	Yes	Progress
Bernardo	2013	Non-feeder	FG	Non-local	Yes	Progress
Delia	2013	Non-feeder	T	Local	Yes	Progress
Vicente	2012	Non-feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Progress
Carlos	2012	Top feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	Graduate
Anna	2012	Top feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Progress
Lorena	2012	Feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Graduate
Nuria	2012	Non-feeder	FG	Non-local	Yes	Graduate
Irma	2012	Feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Graduate
Olivia	2011	Top feeder	FG	Local	Yes	Graduate
Fernando	2010	Non-feeder	FG	Non-local	No	Graduated
Carolina	2010	Non-feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	Graduate
Sergio	2010	Transferred	T	Local	Yes	Left
Tania	2010	Top feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	Graduate
Claudio	2009	Top feeder	T	Non-local	Yes	Graduated
Luis	2009	Feeder	T	Local	No	Graduated
Tomas	2008	Feeder	T	Local	Yes	Graduated

Source: Elaborated by author with information from the interviews

Faculty members

At the time of data collection, there were 24 active members of staff teaching undergraduate students at the School of Economics (fall semester, 2015). Nineteen full-time and one part-time lecturers agreed to participate in the study. From the total sample of faculty members interviewed, seven are female, 13 hold a doctorate degree in economics, 11 are alumni, seven are non-economists, five have been head of the school, including the one in office at the moment of data collection, and six have been head of the academic affairs office[11], including the current one (see Table 3.7).

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[11] Head of academic affairs is an administrative position within each school, usually taken by a member of faculty. It oversees critical services supporting students and faculty members by organising modules, timetabling,

Table 3.7 Faculty members participating in the study

	First degree economics	Undergraduate alumni	Holds PhD	Tutor experience	Active tutor	Head of academic affairs	Head of School
Male (n=13)	10	7	9	10	6	5	5
Female (n=7)	3	3	4	4	3	1	0
TOTAL= 20	13	10	13	14	9	6	5

Source: Elaborated by author with information from the interviews

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enrolment, quality assurance, and promotion of student exchange programmes, student academic support, leads the academic commission, and oversees the good behaviour of students within the institution.

Summary

This chapter introduces an overview of the methodology, research design and methods chosen to conduct this study. It was discussed the mode of thought that frames my study is one of a narrative nature, concerned with experiences shared by individuals, with meaning constructed through those accounts. This study does not offer an absolute truth, but a pluralist position based on critical reflection of reality, so knowledge is socially constructed, with interactions and experiences at the centre of the development of knowledge. The diversity of interpretations that can be given to the world is the view behind the methodology chosen, making my position a relativist one.

Having a shared experience with participants, and being a member of the community where the research takes place gives me the status of an insider researcher, and this awareness is noted in the way I conduct interpretations, and the decisions I made on the chosen approach to conduct this research. My choice of using an interpretative approach aims to highlight that students' complex nature incorporates important elements that escape the quantitative analysis of variables bounded to overgeneralised definitions. Also, the choice of a case study perspective provides the possibility to describe data within the context of occurrence and the opportunity to explain the complexities of real life situations in detail.

The chapters discusses the research questions in detail, and it is established that the objective of the study is to find answers to why students leave the course, how they overcome barriers to completion, how membership of academic elitism is achieved and what academics' views on the phenomenon of dropout and persistence are. Details on the characteristics of participants and their recruitment process are presented, together with the discussion of semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection.

4. Understanding Why Students Leave the Course: School Related Barriers

This chapter explores the barriers associated with the decision to leave the course, and it focuses on reasons developed within the environment of the institution. The discussion is based on the experience of twelve students who left the course (see Chapter Three, section 3.3.3). As discussed in Chapter One, non-completion is a multifactorial phenomenon that requires a complex analysis. On the surface, the School of Economics explains dropout in terms of three elements reported by students: (1) the course was not what they expected, (2) students are not willing to put in the study hours required, and (3) students consider the academic rigour of the school to be excessive. This information was provided by the Academic Coordinator of the School (see Appendix 5), and it is based on feedback from students who notified their decision to leave. Not all students give official notification of their decision and tracking students to encourage them to enrol is not a practice observed in public universities. This non-standardised and partial data collection procedure is the only source of reasons for leaving the course available at the School.

The limited set of reasons aforementioned partially resonates with the literature available for Mexican institutions, which relies heavily on issues related to student satisfaction and unmet expectations of the course (Altamira, 1997; De Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, & Hernández Saldaña, 2011; Dzay-Chulim & Narvaez-Trejo, 2012), except that students who leave the course in the context of the present study do not refer to a disappointment in the quality of the education offered, but in how they do not feel aligned with the demands of the course. Although these three reasons were also mentioned by participants in this study, an in-depth discussion of the elements behind the decision to leave the course reveals there is more to those three reasons, and incorporates the consideration of difficulties in developing a sense of belonging, poor provision of student

support, dealing with stress and anxiety, self-exclusion, peer influence, and *symbolic violence* practices.

When asked directly why they had left the course, nine out of twelve students referred to School-related barriers as the reasons for leaving. Based on what students experienced as the most important reasons behind their decision to leave the course, I introduce the discussion of School-related barriers first. In the following chapter, pre-university, student related and home related barriers will be discussed.

Literature emphasises the decision to leave does not occur in a single moment, but it is a process, with stages where individuals assess the options available to them (Tinto, 1975). Similarly, empirical studies suggest students make this decision despite institutional efforts to support them to stay (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Different from what is broadly found in literature, students who left the course in the present study experience a sense of abandonment, together with a perception of being expendable for an institution that cares for students who possess characteristics they do not identify in themselves. The burden of the decision to leave is set on the students' shoulders, and it is a decision that leaves negative traces in students' self-concept, which remain even when they have succeeded in achieving the goal of graduating from a different programme.

The most influential models used in the study of dropout and retention have been developed in the context of residential universities, mostly located in the United States. In those institutions, students tend to leave home to go to college, and an observed characteristic of those universities is the institutional commitment to provide student promote attainment. In studies conducted in the UK, emphasis is given to features of student satisfaction and a sense of belonging at the core of the matter, (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Thomas, 2002; Thomas, 2012; Yorke, 1999; Yorke & Thomas, 2003).

For the case of Mexico, very limited literature is found that can be applied to the context of this study, as research available focuses on educational models with significant

differences, and findings identify a sense of disappointment experienced by students as a key reason to leave, as the quality of education offered does not meet students' expectations (De Vries, León Arenas, Romero Muñoz, & Hernández Saldaña, 2011). Other studies describe dropout based on academic failure and a lack of engagement explained by poor course choice (Pacheco & Burgos, 2007; Dzay-Chulim & Narvaez-Trejo, 2012). In a study on dropout among students of medical school, a context that shares characteristics of of academic elitism, evidence suggests the inability to overcome frustration and the limited availability of academics to solve doubts as reasons to leave the course, but with no further exploration of the elements that construct those barriers is presented (Hernández-Mata, Hernández-Castro, Nieto-Caraveo, & Hernández-Sierra, 2005).

This chapter contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon of non-completion through the analysis of evidence using micro and local perspectives (Yorke & Longden, 2004), i.e. the factors that influence students' withdrawal, observed through interactions at an individual level under the particularities of the context where those individuals interact. It also offers the opportunity to explore the phenomenon in a context that is underrepresented in the literature and presents theoretical challenges to the existing models of dropout and retention that fail to explain non-continuation in the context of academic elitism under policies of a mass system.

The barriers discussed in this section include aspects of academic and social integration, (see Chapter One, 1.2), together with the impact of the School *habitus* and practices associated with an educational model of academic elitism, interacting with elements of transition to university life, found to be a life experience accompanied by high levels of stress (Robotham & Julian, 2006). In this section, I explore how the discourse of academic rigour affects students' self-perception and contributes to the development of a poor sense of belonging. Less-prepared students report how peer-support transforms into a negative influence, generating a pushing force that leads to dropout.

Interviews with *leavers* illustrate how barriers to completion are constructed in a complex way and have an influence not only from the academic environment, but from the social environment where students locate themselves within school in the early stages of transition into university life. First-generation students face challenges that emerge from multiple channels, and experience the course from a disadvantaged position. These channels are related to economic, social, and *cultural capital* deficits when compared to their peers in this context, a misalignment that is internalised as being unfit to the expectations of the course

The category of institutional barriers is extensive, and it is the one that involves more negative emotions among participants. I observe six subcategories, as shown in Figure 4.1. The first barrier encountered in the transition process is a discourse that sets an environment of failure and stress, even before students are faced with assessment. Secondly, once the course gets going, the academic demands, teaching methods and the assessment that characterises the course represent a barrier to academic integration, and the inability to take effective actions to face it at an early stage differentiate them from more able peers, a characteristic that develops into a poor sense of belonging. This later barrier arises from distancing practices that undermine academic integration.

Exploring further the area of social integration, a fourth element I find is related to the negative influence of peers, leading to behaviours in detriment of academic development. For female students, there is an element associated with the biased experienced towards certain kind of femininity that is not considered to be suitable in this male-dominated field. Additionally, the limited interactions with academics and the fear to approach them represent an element associated with the decision to leave the course. The last two sets of barriers include individual elements, including goal commitment, and attitude towards setbacks.

Figure 4.1 School-related barriers to completion experienced by leavers
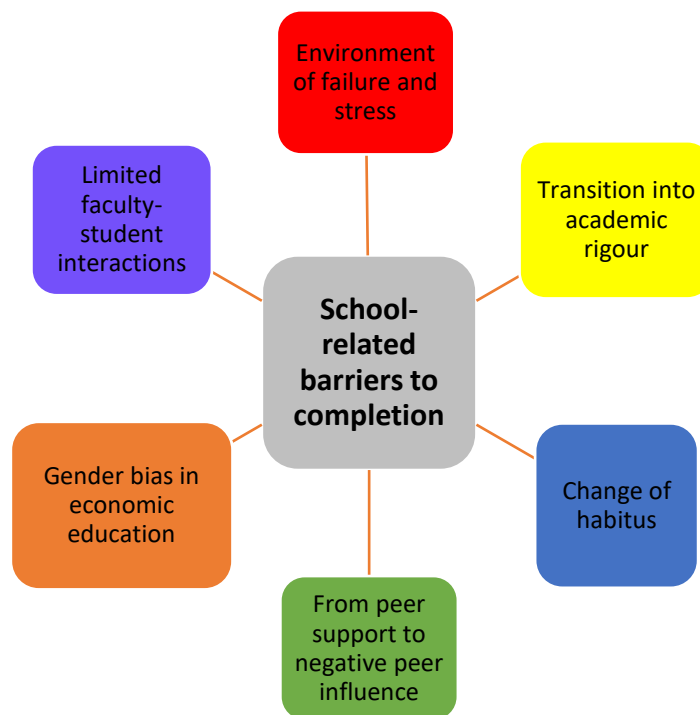
Source: Elaborated by author

Family related factors are discussed, particularly the impact of financial issues at home, such as the need to provide an income at home, and home practices that clash with the practices expected by the School, such as the pressure to meet family commitments that take time from study responsibilities. The following subsections will present in detail the findings and discussion of school related barriers to completion.

To help the reader identify elements that describe participants throughout this thesis, three annotations accompany the names after each quote: whether they are first-generation (FG) or traditional (T), local (L) describing students who have their permanent address in Monterrey and the Metropolitan Area, opposite to non-local (Non-L), who have moved away from home to attend school. The year refers to the point in the course progression when the participant withdrew, and it does not necessarily represent the chronological time spent in school, which could be longer for those who lagged behind.

The characteristics of students who left the course are summarised in Table 4.1. The years spent enrolled at the School of Economics does not necessarily correspond to academic progressed, since many students retake modules in the time they were enrolled.

Table 4.1 Leavers grouped by type and years spent in School

	First generation	Traditional
Local	Ricardo, 4 years Daniel, 1 year Alba, 4.5 years Hilda, 3.5 years	Alberto, 2.5 years Israel, 1 year Raquel, 4 years Diana, 1.5 years Ada, 1 year Nelly, 3.5 years
Non-Local		Esther, 1 year Ignacio, 1.5 years

Source: Elaborated by author with information from the interviews

4.1 'In here you are nobody': loss of identity.

Most students come to university at around age 17, an age of transition. Young people are in the threshold of moving from close guidance or surveillance of grown-ups to becoming more autonomous and taking responsibilities for the first time; Raquel makes reference to this confusing stage in life. Becoming a university student represents greater responsibility and learning to be independent. Immerse in this process, students find themselves in an environment that questions their identity as successful students, and the confidence to be able to make it is undermined.

You come to something new, in a rather complicated age, because you feel you are

an adult, you think you know it all, you get there and suddenly you know nothing,

forget about everything you thought you knew, because in here you are nobody, you

know nothing and you're just about to start. (Raquel, T, L, Y3)

In the context of academic elitism, going to university does not necessarily represent a continuation of the preparation received in prior schooling, but the beginning of a new way of learning that is perceived as threatening. Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) identify the importance of helping students realise if their course choice was suitable for them not only based on their interest in the subject area, but in the compatibility between the student and the institution. Academic elitism tends to attract students who perceive themselves as able to deal with a course of rigour and with a self-concept of achievement. The fatalistic discourse that characterises the first weeks in the course is used by the institution to *help them realise* they will no longer be top of the class or high performers, and in order to stay they will be required to make extraordinary efforts.

> *I realised it was not a game anymore, it was something serious, and despite having realised that, I didn't take action, I was still reading the day before or studying a few hours before the exam. I had been warned, I thought they were just bluffing, and in the first exams I suffered quite a lot. (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)*

For some students like Daniel, beginning his experience at this School knowing he would be expected to make a greater effort than before is information internalised using his prior academic experience from high-school, and his story illustrates how the School takes for granted that students will be able to process the information provided in the way the School expects it. One of the risks associated with this practice is overseeing the disadvantage of less-prepared to integrate into an environment of intense academic work. The normalisation of low grades despite the effort anticipated in the first weeks represents the first encounter with a School *doxa*, those things 'people accept without knowing' (Bourdieu & Eagleton, 1992), that imposes on students a new identify that drifts from their high-achievement self-perception.

Students who experienced difficulties in transitioning to the demands of academic rigour emphasise the negative impact of a lack of effective support for their academic development. Esther shares an experience at an early stage of one of the core modules in the first semester. Using the metaphor of a traffic light, where red would mean students were doing badly, amber meaning a warning of a high risk of not succeeding and green being a satisfactory level of effort for the module, her professor meets students individually to discuss the results of such assessment. In this meeting, Esther is suggested to consider if economics had been the right choice for her, and the impact of this exchange feeds the idea of an imminent negative outcome:

> *We were all shocked, I left crying, I was given amber. I was like, wait until it happens,*
> *I haven't assimilated it and you're already telling me I'm going to do badly. (Esther,*
> *T, Non-L, Y1)*

The outcome of this exchange has negative implications for Esther, and far from encouraging her to strive in her studies, it triggers confusion and a sense of rejection. This is the experience of a student whose family has a first-hand reference to higher education, who has the economic resources to be fully dedicated to her studies, and who comes with an identity of high academic achievement. Contrary to what literature suggests, the strengths students bring to university are not enough to overcome the difficulties of the School environment, it takes more than advantages such as economic and *cultural capital* to succeed.

At a very early stage, students have to negotiate their identity in an environment of academic elitism, with a pessimistic discourse that triggers stress; the task does not facilitate the academic integration into the School community. What comes next for students is to get to know first-hand what is implied by high academic demand and rigour in this context, and to put to the test how prepared they are to meet the demands of this course.

4.2 'It was brutal, like falling from a cloud': transition into academic elitism.

Astin (1993) presents a model of student development that explains how outputs in education are affected by what students bring from their prior experiences as well as the elements incorporated throughout their time as students in university, outside and inside the university environment. Being able to incorporate what is needed to succeed in the course is of central importance to foster progression and eventually completion.

An experience observed regarding the transition from high-school to university life is the time it takes less-prepared students to realize the need for different strategies to deal with university modules, and a slow response in this adaptation process generates a negative impact throughout their permanence in the course. Students receive advice in the form of warnings, but not in terms of practical approaches on how to take control over learning. Evidence in this study shows not all students have the awareness nor the skills to do it, but additionally, academic elitism requires a level of effort and dedication that goes beyond what students anticipate. Participants report how different the experience in higher education is for some of their friends and start to identify what academic rigour means in this School, compared to what friends were experiencing in other school within the same university.

> *I saw her coursework, her exams, I saw when she studied and she would have the typical list of questions and answers and I thought 'it cannot be that you're studying that compared to what I have to study for an exam'. (Alberto, T, L, Y2)*

Alberto's friend was required a level of effort he perceived as much lower to what was expected from him, his friend was required to spend less time doing schoolwork, she was given fewer materials to cover in her modules, and she was top of her class. In contrast, he had to deal with greater amounts of schoolwork, he would struggle with most modules, and was failing exams every semester. Alberto, similar to many other students who enrol in economics, comes with prior experiences of high achievement, he is also a student with the

economic resources needed to be fully dedicated to his studies, his family supports him and puts a high value to education. The characteristics of Alberto make him, in paper, a suitable student for a course that demands high-levels of engagement. This apparent compatibility would indicate a pathway leading to intentions to persist (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). Students like Alberto start the course believing they are truly good students. Consequently, the experience of chronic failure becomes an element of shame. Alba provides an example of how talking about school with friends who are not familiar with academic elitism becomes an experience that feeds a negative feeling triggered by academic failure:

> *My friends would contact me but I tried not to see them, I didn't open up much to talk, because there would be a point when they would ask 'how's school?' and saying I had failed was too embarrassing. (Alba, FG, L, Y2)*

Alba experiences a process of separation and isolation, she is no longer part of that group of friends from outside school who share experiences of success in their own contexts, and is neither fully integrated in a context she fails to align with. Her attempts to be part of an environment of academic elitism represents a high risk of failure. The confusion generated is worsened by the fact that students are left on their own to overcome this challenge without guidance, and their learning process to adapt occurs in an environment of dislocation and anxiety. Students who left report becoming slowly aware of the differences between them and their better-prepared peers.

Leavers admit they did not make an effort similar to what they observed in some of their classmates, explained not by disinterest in the course, but a lack of resources needed to cope with the academic demands expected. Students make use of what they know, the same strategies applied in high-school, and even though some participants suggest they made an effort in changing their study habits and exam preparation strategies, their efforts seemed to be insufficient to meet the educational model of academic elitism that was new to them.

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I would study, I filled three notebooks with practices and I would revise again, and I would understand them as I was completing them when I was studying with classmates, but in the exam I felt I didn´t know how to answer it. Perhaps I had not learnt it, I don't want to blame the exam or the lecturer, perhaps there was something I was not fully understanding. (Nelly, T, L, Y2)

Nelly is a traditional student who left the course after spending three years in school. Despite the progression achieved in the first academic year, she was not able to meet the academic requirement of more advanced modules and finally transferred to a different university. Nelly expressed an interest in the course, she felt comfortable in the School environment, she had family support and no financial difficulties, her group of friends at School was solid, her difficulty was of an academic nature. As discussed earlier, academic failure is reported as one of the reasons why students leave the course, but Nelly's story of hard work and poor results illustrates an alarming situation, the fact that students who are dedicated and hardworking end up making inefficient efforts to meet academic performativity.

Assessment practices are reported to be a main barrier to progression. Nelly identifies that despite the time spent on studying and revising, she was unable to identify why she was not able to get satisfactory results. The curriculum followed in the context of this study is known for its mathematical rigour, with challenging materials that can be compared to some of the top programmes worldwide (Duval-Hernández & Villagomez, 2011). The expectations are high and students do not doubt teachers or the methods used for the evaluation. Nelly illustrates how the internalisation of the School *doxa* is based on the authority of lecturers.

Academics' practices are not challenged, their doctoral degrees from prestigious universities abroad grant them a status of being knowledgeable, leaving students with the doubt of not understanding what it takes in order to demonstrate they have achieved the

learning objectives. The way academic elitism is presents in this School goes beyond what many students have experienced before, and the transition into this educational model has a dramatic impact on the student experience.

> *In the School of Economics I experienced something I never imagined, I was 'on hold', I took a fourth opportunity and failed, so I had to take a fifth opportunity and did not pass again… it was like being on a tall building and going straight to the floor, it was brutal, like falling from a cloud. (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)*

Transitioning to an environment of academic elitism sets expectations on students' capacity to develop skills and abilities to become academic beings, to restructure the way time is spent and put academic requirements at the top of their priorities, a change that turns out to be too drastic for some. Bourdieu (1984) suggests academic elitism works in the relation between power and knowledge, and how this power is maintained by rigorous processes of selection and indoctrination. The gap between prior experience and academic elitism becomes an individual struggle. Daniel was not able to process the warnings and advice received from more experienced peers, and the level of effort applied to his studies, and his exam preparation strategies were not enough to obtain positive results.

The need for the development of coping behaviours and academic skills suggested by Bean and Eaton (2001) is identified in the narrative of *leavers.* The experiences are reported by both first-generation and traditional students, hence the practices of the School under the umbrella of high academic demands and rigour represent an institutional barrier linked to the characteristics of a course of academic elitism that expects students to meet their own development needs.

> *We were told that in this School those who are dumb become intelligent, and those who are intelligent become brilliant. That was a shock. (Raquel, T,L, Y3)*

The discourse of turning *dumb* students *intelligent* and the *intelligent* ones into *brilliant,* without the commitment to support the development of coping mechanisms or academic skills to achieve this outstanding result, unveils the working premise that the School expects students to be *diamonds in the rough* that will shine as a result of forces of pressure, represented by the poor results obtained that require more and more efforts to be exerted. The frustration of not reaching a satisfactory academic outcome makes persistence difficult, and the discourse of academic rigour does not dilute for students, but it becomes more challenging as they make progress in the course.

> *I liked it but there was a point when I thought 'this cannot be, I like it but I can't.' I could see myself graduating being an elderly lady, with a walking stick and all, because no matter how much I tried and tried, I studied a lot and still couldn't, it was frustrating, I realised no matter how much I wanted, I was not going to be able to stay, and that's when I thought it was best to leave. (Alba, FG, L, Y2)*

For the School, Alba's decision to leave the course is apparently a matter of academic failure, but the role played by other elements that lay below surface are not addressed, including the passive position taken by the institution in the face of gaps in students' preparation to meet the expectations of the course. Alba, the same as Nelly, Daniel and Alberto, left the course when faced with the impossibility to pass a module. From the perspective of dropout as a *faillure of the student*, institutions pose a barrier to completion hindered by other elements of integration into the school community.

4.3 *'I am studying with people who are of a different type': change of habitus.*

First-generation students who left the course share an experience characterised by an air of unfamiliarity and discomfort in their transition to higher education. Literature posit the view that students tend to look for shared features with others, and making compatible

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friends becomes a key element in the definition of an identity as a university student and in achieving social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). For some first-generation *leavers* in this context, I observe how building new relationships brings out an early awareness of being different from their classmates, and a feeling of shame and misalignment emerges within the first interactions when attempting to integrate into a new student group.

> *Well, one comes from an environment where one knows what's going on, and then I was with people who have had a good life, they generally don't have to make decisions that would make them feel uncomfortable, and for me that was uncomfortable, to clash with that way of thinking or things that happen around you. (Ricardo, FG, L, Y2)*

Ricardo goes through a transition not only into a new field, represented by higher education, but into a different *habitus* characterised by elements of privilege he lacks. He identifies his classmates have had *a good life*, particularly with reference to the availability of resources that facilitate their participation in higher education and their opportunity to be full-time students with no restrictions set by economic needs. Similar to what is observed among mature students with responsibilities to provide at home (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). For first-generation students who face economic difficulties at home, the predominantly middle class disposition of the School represent a significant disadvantage.

The most important resource the School expects students to have is time, and for a student who needs to provide at home, the need to work results in reduced availability of time to focus on his studies. The integration to the School *habitus* is different in comparison to what privileged students go through, and this causes Ricardo a feeling of discomfort. His strategy to integrate in School was to find others he perceived to be like him, and the group where he found a place to integrate was characterised by behaviours of low academic integration.

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The people I would hang out with, we were not the type of people that would contribute with ideas to the discussion. There were easy problems that made me struggle, while other classmates were able to solve them easily. I was concerned, 'what will they think of me?' Because I immediately realised I had a noticeable academic disadvantage. (Ricardo, FG, L, Y2)

The academic disadvantage is only the tip of the iceberg for students who come from less-privileged backgrounds. The elements of the dominant social class in the *habitus* of the School made Ricardo perceive himself as out of place, and in saying *what will they think of me*, he reveals the awareness of his condition as being different from others. Alba contributes to the observation of this out of place feeling, as she refers to her deficit of linguistic capital compared to her peers

I was studying with people who are of a different type, from other schools, with a different level of learning. I noticed those differences simply through their way of speaking, their use of words, there were words I would not use… I only enjoyed listening to them, but giving my opinion? I didn't know what to say. (Alba, FG, L, Y2)

The use of language is explored by Bourdieu (1977) to explain how a symbolic asset such as language not only represents membership to a social class, but it can also render a value and function. Alba identifies at an early stage her lack of linguistic capital, and this deficiency triggers shame and a sense of not being part of this community of students she perceived as well-educated, a different *type* compared to hers. Both Ricardo and Alba exemplify the phenomenon of *fish out of water* based on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*.

I felt bad, I excluded myself, I wouldn't open up because it was embarrassing, at first I would say well, I could learn from them, but as we progressed in the course I felt embarrassed and I drifted apart. (Alba, FG, L, Y2)

Self-exclusion is a strategy adopted by students who feel the need to hide their disadvantage out of shame, their self-perception as being different from the rest generates a barrier to social integration. In coming to the School of Economics not only do they find they lack readiness for academic rigour, they enter a context dominated by people who are different from them beyond academic matters.

The *habitus* of the School, which sets the dispositions that shape the practices expected within this context, is predominantly middle-class, the expectations of the academic environment of high rigour imply a new *habitus* that represents a dissonance between what is known to students and what is now expected from them. Educational experiences are very personal and intimate experiences too, filled with emotional elements that can have deep meanings to students. Going to university means for some students a process of isolation, hence, making friends will become a key strategy to overcome challenges in higher education, and a significant element in the definition of an identity as a university student. In the following subsection I discuss how peers have an impact on the decision to leave the course.

4.4 'How boring, let's go out and play': from peer-support to negative peer influence.

Going to university implies for most students making new friends, and this becomes particularly important in a context where students are expected to spend an average of eight hours per day in School. For students who have moved away from home to attend university, making friends represents a strategy to counteract the challenges of the complex transition of leaving home. In facing situations of change, friends become a way of getting support, guidance, encouragement and other functions of wellbeing (Buote et al., 2007).

Esther and Ignacio moved away from home to attend university. Even though they come from neighbouring states, they do not go back home often because of their academic workload. For Ignacio, making friends was easy, and even though he realised they could be a

source of distraction, he was able to set his studies as a priority and reports no negative

experiences from the process of making friends and the subsequent interactions with them.

The experience for Esther was far from easy. Sharing a house with a friend from her

hometown represented a source of support at home, her housemate would take a maternal

role. Yet friends in School were the source of feelings of discomfort. At an early stage it is

observed how competition among students is a driving force in the interaction with others,

and although the competition does not eliminate cooperation, it does define the type of

interaction developed. Students are set to compete against each other. Because they could

not excel in the ways they used to, they now have to prove to others they are better fit to

meet the demands of the course

> *I hung out with classmates, but there was too much rivalry, it was weird, because we*
>
> *were together all day long, I don't know, they are really envious, very competitive*
>
> *among them. I'm not stupid, if I didn't do well it's not because I don't know or I didn't*
>
> *learn. I mean, I really love them because they are my friends, but here in School it*
>
> *was like hell. (Esther, T, Non-L, Y1)*

Esther experienced difficulties in her interaction with peers. The challenges were not

bases on socioeconomic factors but on the competitive environment promoted by the

School. Students share experiences of discomfort in working in small groups, and the

dynamics observed in group exchanges can be explained in terms of the subject area. The

nature of the area of study, economics, shapes how the role of peers is played and how

friendships are developed in the university experience. The idea that *there is no such thing*

as a free lunch[12] means that in order to get one thing, individuals have to give another one

of a similar perceived value, in other words, nothing comes for free. In practical terms, this

means students are willing to help their peers provided others are in the position to offer

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[12] The origin of the phrase is unknown, but it the world of economics it was popularised by Milton Friedman
(1975).

support and help them in return. For students who have poor academic preparation compared to their peers, and those who struggle with integrating into the School *habitus*, this dynamic represents a challenge in finding peers to study with, as they face the impossibility to enter into a dynamic of equal exchange. While that mind-set could be an engine of academic development, it is also a source of stress and anxiety that adds to the emotional experience in the transition process.

Literature on student engagement suggests learning communities contribute to improve academic performance, and students experience gains in both social and academic integration through participation in those communities (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Vincent Tinto is a figure of influence in the study of dropout and retention in higher education, and he has been an advocate of the idea that learning communities and collaborative pedagogies are of great importance to enhance student involvement in learning and persistence (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1995; Tinto, 1997). The weakness in such strategy is the assumption that participants are willing to learn with others and that the environment generated in the group will have a positive impact on participants. In the context of the School of Economics, students are faced with the need to work with others as a strategy of academic and emotional support, but when they find a negative element in the interaction, it generates push and pull forces that work in detriment of engagement and the development of a sense of belonging.

The positive academic outcomes gained through peer-support are observed when students find a place to interact with peers, and all members of the group have a shared commitment to achieve academic success, but there are also risks involved in relying heavily on peer-support and interaction. Daniel and Alberto illustrate the case of how positive peer-support can transform into negative peer influence when commitment to school is no longer a priority. They became close friends through their study group, and they shared an interest in football that soon found an echo among other students. The initial positive

outcomes of the first exams served as a justification to reduce study time and dedicate more time to social activities.

> *I would see other studying, and I would say I don't need to study so much, anyway I know I'm going to make it. There was an impulse of saying how boring, let's go out and play, I can ask for lecture notes later. (Alberto, T, L, Y2)*

What started as a source of support became the origin of a negative influence. Again, peer-support comprises push and pull forces that represent both a benefit and a risk to student permanence. Student based elements play a central role in this regard, and they will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Ignoring the advice from more experienced students, tutors, or even faculty members is accompanied by behaviours that shift students' commitment from academic to social activities. The tutorial system, which aims at accompanying students in their transition and help them identify early signs of disengagement and risk of dropout fails in doing so. Students start rearranging the priorities of time spent in school to activities of a more rewarding nature for them. School does not take the priority position required to meet the demands of a highly rigorous academic environment.

The format of lecture teaching results distant for students, and low levels of engagement make less-prepared students an easy target of distraction. Friendship can influence student adjustment, and it is of particular relevance for first-generation students who lack reference at home on what to expect in higher education. Peers who become friends provide a sense of belonging, are a source of information, assistance, encouragement and advice, but negative effects are also observed to emerge from peer-interaction. Skipping lessons in order to do more enjoyable activities, and in general drifting away from their commitment to their studies was a mechanism to escape the frustration of failure. Friendship becomes a priority over schoolwork, and the positive elements of peer-

support transform into negative influence in detriment of academic engagement and development.

> *I was distracted with my friends, relaxed with my buddies, in that aspect it affected*
>
> *me in terms of academic progress, but in regards to friendship, it was stronger.*
>
> *(Alberto, T, L, Y2)*

Making friends at university is a sign of integration, and literature suggest that in general friendships in the first year of university render positive results in terms of adjustment to the new environment (Buote et al., 2007), yet friendships have to be managed strategically, keeping a balance between the social and the academic realm. In the words of Ignacio, '*perhaps friends are a distractor, but you have to learn how to handle it, you will always run into people, everywhere.*'

4.5 'It's a male dominated school': gender-biased issues in economics education

The School reports the enrolment of male and female students has kept a balanced distribution in the last decades, and this is anecdotally used to state the School has a gender-neutral environment, different from what research shows with only four in every ten undergraduate students in economics in the UK being women, allegedly due to low application rates (Tonin & Wahba, 2015). For Mexico, a growth in the participation of women in economics has been observed, from a 26% in the 1980s to 43% by 2007 (Duval-Hernández & Villagomez, 2011), with no more recent information available to the best of my knowledge.

Despite the perceived gender-neutrality of this School, I find interactions with lecturers reveal a hidden discourse of gender bias. For students like Esther and Raquel, integrating both socially and academically to School comes with an additional element. Their capacity to complete the course was challenged by lecturers based not on their academic

skills or commitment to the course, but based on being a *pretty face* and being a *type of woman* not suitable to go to university.

> *When I started school a lecturer told my parents and myself this school was not for models, they didn't want pretty faces they wanted brains, because I had not scored the points needed. I was a few points short and I told them I really wanted to study there, I asked for an opportunity. I've never had a high self-esteem, but with that situation my self-esteem dropped down to the ground. Perhaps I was not as good with numbers as others are, but I wanted to make an effort. (Raquel, T, L Y3)*

and*:*

> *In the second semester a professor once told me in the middle of a session 'oh you, you never shut up, there are women who should not go to university, who are marked to be housewives,' and that was it, I didn't want to know any more about economics... I was not comfortable there, I don't know, perhaps I could have been an economist. (Esther, T, Non-L, Y1)*

Exploring gender-biased issues in the field of economics is beyond the scope of this study, but ignoring the impact of the experiences of Esther and Raquel would mean a missed opportunity to discuss an issue of relevance. Raquel used this experience as a motivation to prove that despite her difficulty to meet the entry requirements she was able to meet the standards, and she used the pressure of the environment as a trigger of her determination to excel. Her commitment to the goal of graduating was fed by a gender based discrimination that is not unheard of in a field of studies perceived by Raquel as dominated by men.

Throughout her interview, Raquel makes reference to the constant process of proving herself worthy of the opportunity she was given in a male dominated school, and uses it as an incentive to strengthen her commitment. However, the levels of stress and exhaustion

from sleep deprivation added medical problems for her. It is documented in literature that for female students there is a self-selection in not choosing fields of study that are perceived as masculine (Ayalon, 2003) and in most cases they choose male dominated fields when they feel they have qualities above the level of requirement. Raquel was told from the start she did not meet those requirements, and her outstanding effort was a response to convince peers and faculty members to consider her a worth member of the community.

> *Whenever I had to resit an exam I would tell myself, I'm going to pass, no matter what I have to do, even if it takes revising 60 hours per day, I will study until I pass, and it was like that for four years… my mother reached a point where instead of saying 'you can do this' she would say 'calm down, or you will get ill, you are abusing now, this is insane.' (Raquel, T, L, Y3)*

After spending four years at the School of Economics, Raquel decided to leave the course when she learnt she had failed a module for the fifth time and was going to be on hold for the third time. Her decision cannot be explained simply in terms of academic failure, but by a deeper process of constant struggle to earn her membership. She transferred to a different university to study economics, where she succeeded in completing the course. Her commitment to becoming an economist was not enough to help her overcome the barriers set by the educational model of academic elitism in this School, and the social and emotional factors that affected her throughout her experience in school and beyond.

> *I sat down and cried, but I thought: this is not the end of the world, I won't let anyone stop me, I want to keep studying economics, I like the course, but this is not my place anymore. (Raquel, T,L, Y3)*

Esther illustrates another way in which gender-bias is observed in this School. Being labelled in public as a type of woman unfit to attend university gave her the final reason to

decide to leave school. The result of that public interaction was an increased sense of being out of place, and the rivalry observed among peers, and the academic struggle despite her efforts, produced an effect that weakened her already challenged commitment to the course. The interaction of different elements generated within the institution worked in detriment to the development of a sense of belonging, an element found in literature to be fundamental to promote persistence in higher education (Thomas, 2012).

The fact that only two participants who left the course report facing a gender-biased experience does not necessarily mean these are isolated events, nor that the issue should be minimised. *Students in progression* also make reference to experiences of disadvantage, and those will be discussed further in Chapter Seven. These students illustrate a phenomenon that is emerging within the field of economics, the disadvantaged position women experience in the economics profession studied as a sexism problem is an approach that has recently caught the attention of media and academics (Wolfers, 2017; Wu, 2017) and further research will be of relevance to provide evidence on the barriers to women's participation and professional development in fields of power in society.

4.6 'They were almost like gods': limited faculty-student interaction.

At the time of data collection, the School of Economics reported a total of 371 undergraduate students enrolled, with 28 faculty members teaching undergraduate students. It is a relatively small school within a university system that in 2017 reported nearly 190,000 students enrolled from high-school to postgraduate degrees. Literature makes reference of the role the size of the institution plays in the amount of student-faculty interaction (Napoli & Wortman, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993;), observing that the larger the school, the fewer out of class contact opportunities occur, leading to lower social integration.

Evidence in this study suggests that despite the small size of the school, faculty members are distant, and the remoteness of faculty is instrumental in students' decision to leave the course. From twelve participants, only one reported that lecturers were approachable and kind. Hilda was introduced by a friend of her family, an alumni who approached a professor at School asking him to *keep an eye on her* and support her in her studies. This form of social capital represented an advantage for Hilda, as it had an influence on the way she was treated in School, a condition rarely experienced by first-generation students.

Hilda developed a sense of closeness and familiarity, but the rest of the participants made reference to more distant interactions, usually limited to the classroom, and often brief and formalistic. As suggested by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), students' experiences suggest interactions in the classroom are important antecedents of limited subsequent interactions, as illustrated in the following quote:

> *It was very noticeable, the limits set 'I am the teacher, you are the student and that's it', I never felt confident enough to approach lecturers with my questions, and if they were explaining something and I didn't understand and asked 'could you explain me a bit more?' they would say 'no, I can't go back, check it in the book or your notes.' (Ignacio, T, Non-L, Y1)*

Literature on faculty-student interaction suggests that the more interaction there is, the better grades students get, and this is based, among other elements, on the fact that lecturers observe students' behaviour and reward those students who reflect the values that faculty consider important (Bean & Kuh, 1984). When a student asks for the clarification of a topic that has already been discussed in class, and the lecturer refuses to discuss it again, the resulting perception of academics is varied, from being unreceptive to being too busy to spend time on the doubts of the few. Students report feeling discouraged from asking questions in class or attempt to contact lecturers outside the classroom.

Students interpret lecturers' dispositions through subtle ways, such as dress code and language choice, and use their observations to decide if lecturers are open to establish a closer interaction with them. Earlier in this chapter, it was discussed how Alba feels out of place in school, and in regard to faculty interaction, she reports feeling at ease when approaching lecturers who follow a casual dress code and use a language that feels close to students, while her experiences with lecturers who follow a more formal dress code lead to the perception of lecturers not being open to hold an interaction with students.

> *Dr. [name 1] was always in jeans and a T-shirt, his way of speaking was good for young people, there were moments when he would use examples talking about beer, parties, partners, something more connected to the world of young students, but Dr. [name 2] always dressed smartly, and used a very low voice, it was hard to hear him, he would talk to the board, not us, that didn't work for me. (Alba, FG, L, Y2)*

The sense of being a *fish out of water* experienced by disadvantaged students is emphasised by pedagogic practices that work in detriment of less-prepared students' academic integration and development. The difficulties faced by students are based on the interactive behaviours academics choose to present themselves to students in class, as Alba notices, not only in the language chosen to address the students, but in reducing student-faculty interaction opportunities already limited by the use of non-inclusive pedagogic practices.The closer students felt to the lecturers, the more confident they were to ask questions, but the interaction was not only discouraged by faculty in terms of the behaviours and pedagogic practices chosen, but students also have an initiative in avoiding contact with lecturers, as a strategy to reduce the shame of exposing themselves as underprepared and unfit members of the community.

> *I never interacted with lecturers, I never talked to them. Students who interacted*
>
> *with them were those who knew about the contents of the module, they knew what*
>
> *to talk about. (Alberto, T, L Y2)*

and:

> *They were almost like gods, you couldn't reach them… there were lecturers who*
>
> *knew a lot, but it was really scary to approach them with my questions. (Daniel, FG,*
>
> *L, Y1)*

Bean and Kuh (1984) find that the positive effect of interactions between faculty and students is a reciprocal behaviour, where good students want to interact with lecturers and lecturers seek those interactions too. What Alberto illustrates is a fear of exposing his poor academic progress, and his new self-perception of being a low-achiever makes him decide not to seek the attention of lecturers, and lecturers act in a reciprocal way. The distancing behaviour observed is promoted by both sides, and this results in missed learning opportunities that must be compensated through strategies such as *laboratorios,* study groups, peer-support and additional independent study. The encouragement from tutors was limited to a superficial discourse characterised by the phrase "*échale ganas",* and it is what Daniel received as feedback from his tutor when he asked for advice on how to approach challenges at the School. The expectation that students will become resourceful is contained in a phrase that leaves students empty handed and confused.

> *It was just a brief chat, like how are you doing, keep trying hard, échale ganas, and*
>
> *you will see everything is possible, and that's it. (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)*

In Spanish, *'echarle ganas'* is a colloquial expression that connotes a sense of encouragement to keep trying despite struggles and failed attempts to achieve something. The expression, embedded in the Mexican culture, is a generic way of encouraging others to do your best, to give it all, without further guidance and regardless of how realistic the goal

is. Literature on Latino students in education in the USA emphasises the importance of this term as an element that helps understand academic resiliency of Mexican immigrants (Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017).

Daniel illustrates how distancing from lecturers can be associated with a feeling of respect and admiration, but in comparing them to gods and feeling scared to approach them, he gives a new meaning to the idea of respect replaced by fear based on the perceived image of faculty members as having great knowledge, great power. The position students give lecturers entitles them to a kind of power that represents the foundation of a relationship based on *symbolic violence*, academics' values become the dominant values, and those values are legitimised based on lecturers' position of power.

> *The professor asked 'are you finally going to transfer to another school? You should have noticed this schools was not for you, from the second semester you should have noticed that' then I said, 'ok, that's it, I give up.' (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)*

The position of power of the lecturer gives a high symbolic value to his words, and Daniel internalises the notion that he should have noticed earlier, he does not belong in the field. Other students who persisted for longer report how lecturers' encouragement served as a motivation to keep making an effort in developing strategies to improve their progress as learners, and that shows how lecturers, similar to peers, have the capacity to exercise push and pull forces to influence students in their decision to either stay or leave the course. Nevertheless, faculty encouragement is not widely reported by *leavers* and the benefits of this type of interaction are missed. In this regard, the models that explain dropout from higher education proposed by Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998), Pascarella (1980) and Bean and Eaton (2001) provide the framework to challenge the practices identified in the School. Those models emphasise the notion that non-completion is not only determined by students' behaviours, but by the institution in not providing opportunities for students to develop skills and abilities to facilitate their academic and social integration in School.

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Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the School-related barriers to completion experienced by *leavers.* The data was obtained from semi-structured interviews with 12 students who left the course. To the knowledge of the School, students leave for three main reasons: (1) poor course choice, (2) lack of effort, and (3) misalignment with a rigorous educational model. In reference to barriers experienced in School, I identify six elements associated to the decision to leave the course, revealing a reality experienced by students that calls for an exercise of awareness on institutional impact on the decision to leave the course.

For students interested in the course, poor academic performativity is behind the decision of leaving, but it originates in ways that distant from simply a lack of effort. The environment of failure and stress that students first encounter in their transition to academic elitism generates a loss of identity. The idea that previous achievements are diminished represents for students a process that redefines themselves as individuals who are not suitable to meet the standards of academic elitism. The change of expectations is dramatic, *like falling from a cloud*, and students approach it in two different ways: with disengagement or with additional efforts*.* This decision occurs in a change of *habitus* that triggers the experience of being a *fish out of water,* particularly among first generation and less-prepared students. This disadvantaged position within the habitus results in poor opportunities to mingle with the successful students, and this contributes to feelings of shame and the need to hide. Students who struggle tend to bond with other students in a similar situation, generating a trap of poor academic advancement

The limited interaction between faculty and students is a practice that overlooks main recommendations found in the literature, which emphasise the benefits students experience from casual interactions with lecturers to promote changes in coping mechanisms, behaviours and skill development needed to achieve positive academic

outcomes, and contribute to develop a sense of belonging. Table 4.2 presents a summary of

School related barriers and a brief description of how they are experienced by students.

Table 4.2 School-related barriers to completion experienced by leavers

BARRIERS	HOW IT IS EXPERIENCED BY STUDENTS
Environment of failure and stress	Peers and faculty use fatalistic expectations as mechanism to *encourage* new students to take an active approach to learning, a practice that generates counterproductive effects. Information received requires prior knowledge of the field of higher education for students to be able to understand it. Less-prepared students fail to take effective actions and failure is experience as an identity loss, they no longer feel talented and able to do well.
Transition into academic rigour	Students move into an environment that demands skills and dispositions beyond students' expectations. Their identity as high achievers is challenged and low self-confidence behaviours emerge.
Change of *habitus*	Awareness of being with people different from self, acknowledge position of disadvantage from a social or academic origin. Relatively lower cultural and linguistic capital, compared to more privileged peers, generates a sense of shame and unfitness among disadvantaged students. Students experience a *Fish out of water* condition, and poor sense of belonging is developed.
From peer-support to negative influence	Given the institutional student support deficit, peers are identified as key source of support. Low self-confidence and poor sense of belonging leads to grouping less-privileged students together, perpetuating their disadvantage. Transition from study groups to truancy groups transforms support into negative influence.
Gender-bias issues in economics education	In a male dominated environment, evidence suggests some female students who share features considered as non-desirable are subject to rejection. This increases poor sense of belonging and discomfort. Emotional cost of proving themselves worthy of membership in the community leads to stress and anxiety that reflects into poor academic performance.
Faculty-student interaction	Distancing practices from faculty are observed among less-prepared students who feel out of place. Fear of exposing themselves as not fit reduces student-initiated interactions, and a fear towards lecturers is observed to be based on a sense of respect merged with *symbolic violence* exercised by academics, perceived by students as not interested in students who do not share similar values academics see in themselves, such as hard work.

Source: Elaborated by author

5. Understanding Why Students Leave the Course: Non-School Related Barriers to Completion

This chapter presents the discussion of barriers to completion observed to occur outside the School realm, and complement the School-related barriers presented in Chapter Four. Similar to what is found in empirical studies in the literature on dropout, this research shows the decision to leave the course occurs at different moments of progression, and it is influenced by elements students bring to the university experience, together with those encountered and developed within the institution.

Table 5.1 Non-school related barriers experienced by leavers

Pre-university barriers	Student related barriers	Home related barriers
-Prior academic preparation	-Commitment to goal	-Financial issues
-Motivations to enrol	-Self-regulating behaviours	-Home and school *habitus*
-Expectations of the course	-Dealing with adversity	misalignment

Source: Elaborated by author

Literature on the importance of external factors on student dropout acknowledges the need of a more student-focused approach to this phenomenon in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of why students leave (Bennett, 2003; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006; Yorke & Thomas, 2003; Willcoxson, 2010). The stories reported by participants in the present study are complex, and reasons for leaving the course are not easy to detangle. In addition to the School-related barriers to completion, I identify three more sets of barriers to completion, as shown in Table 5.1.

In the first section of this chapter I explore pre-university barriers, these are students' prior educational experiences that shape the reasons for leaving the course. The impact of high-school preparation, the course-choice guidance students receive, and the expectations

built around the course before starting university are discussed here. The second section

explores barriers that are related to students themselves. These barriers include students'

level of commitment to the goal of graduating as economists, their capacity to take control

over a more autonomous kind of learning, and how they deal with adversities are examples

of situations discussed here. Finally, I present barriers that are related to home, including

the misalignment between practices observed at home and those expected by the School,

and issues regarding limited economic resources that have an impact on students'

experience and eventually influence their decision to leave the course.

Interviews with students who left the course illustrate how barriers to completion are

constructed in a complex way and are shaped not only by the academic environment, but

also by psychological elements and by the environment students find themselves outside

School. In public higher education in Mexico there are no halls of residence, so all students

commute, distances reported by participants in this study vary from 20 minutes to two

hours. At the end of a school-day students go back home, and except for the few who live

on their own, most students go back to interact with a familial *habitus* that may be clashing

with the expectations and dispositions of the School, the *doxa*.

Students who are first-generation tend to face challenges that emerge from multiple

channels, and experience the course from a disadvantaged position, but the disadvantages

identified in this context are not exclusive to that group of students. Disadvantages are

linked to relatively lower economic, social, and *cultural capital*, when compared to peers in

this context, and a misalignment of prior academic preparation compared to the

expectations of the course. The barriers set by the School environment intersect with non-

School related barriers, and the insufficient support students have to navigate the transition

and integration to the School environment generates a complex scenario that contributes to

shape the decision to leave the course.

Table 5.2 Pre-university barriers experienced by leavers

Prior academic preparation	Motivation to enrol	Expectations about the course and the school
-Mathematics prior learning -Interest in reading -Active learning -Type of assessment in prior academic experiences -Time management -Identity of high achiever	-Influence of vocational guidance -Social perception of the course -Influence of others on course choice -High aspirations	-What economics is about -Being a full-time student

Source: Elaborated by author

5.1 Pre-University barriers

Dropout models suggest prior academic experiences of success are linked to better chances of completing the course (see Chapter One), yet this premise is challenged by a context of academic elitism, in terms of the intense work expected to complete the course. Students in this study bring stories of success from their prior academic experiences, they come with a self-concept of high achievers, and to an extent that explains their interest in being part of a community of academic elitism. Exploring elements found in the experiences students bring from their prior education offers a better understanding of how the decision to leave the course is made. In the category of pre-university barriers I will elaborate on three observed elements: prior academic preparation, motivations to enrol, and expectations of the course, summarised in Table 5.2.

5.1.1 'I studied when I was asked to': prior academic experiences.

Academic background is one of the most widely studied factors associated with dropout. Studies on the influence of prior schooling and prior academic achievement on dropout from higher education emphasise the influence of those experiences on the development of skills and abilities needed to cope with the transition into higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini,1980; Sagy, 2000; Smith & Naylor, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999).

Empirical research suggests high-school grades can be used as predictors of course completion in university (Astin & Oseguera, 2005), but that does not prove to be a strong element to stay for the context of the present study. The grades obtained from prior education represent incomplete information for institutions, due to a lack of standardisation in assessment in prior education and not having reference of the conditions under which students developed their prior academic achievements.

In Mexico, students do not have much opportunity to choose the subjects they study in high-school, it is a set curriculum and it requires all students to take modules such as mathematics and science. Only three-year high-school programmes will offer elective modules in the final year, which include more advanced modules of mathematics and modules of more specific fields of study, such as introduction to accountancy, economics, sociology, arts, or mechatronics, to mention a few. In this sense, it is natural for higher education institutions to assume students come with a relatively standardised preparation in areas such as mathematics, a subject considered relevant in the preparation to go to university (Jacob, Dynarski, Frank, & Schneider, 2017). However, the way students are evaluated varies from one high-school to another, and what it takes for students to succeed in high-school could be different from what it takes to succeed in a university course.

Ricardo attended a private catholic school from secondary to high-school, he reports his classmates were disruptive and most of the time he wanted to be left alone. For him, focusing on his studies was a way to isolate himself from the negative environment he wanted to avoid in class, and this experience shaped his approach to studying and learning:

> *I was a very dedicated student, because I was forced by my parents in order to get good grades. Later on I realised that by doing what I was told to do I would not get in trouble with teachers… mostly I studied when I was asked to, during exams, or when I liked a topic. (Ricardo, FG, L, Y2)*

Students like Ricardo are subject to surveillance and guidance from grown-ups during high-school education, and academic performance is subject to that supervision. Prior academic experiences that promote student dependence and micro managerial practices represent a disadvantage in the transition to a more autonomous environment, as it is the case for higher education, where students are expected to take control over time management, study strategies, and the prioritisation of school related activities. Taking rigorous coursework in prior education is identified as a fundamental element to succeed in the transition to higher education (Adelman, 1999), and research has stated first-generation students are less likely to have had that experience compared to non-first generation peers (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunex , 2001).

The School has little information on how students have learnt to engage with their studies, the shared feature observed is that students who enrol at the School of Economics identify themselves as above average in comparison to their peers in prior experiences, and they feel initially confident to become members of an academically-demanding and prestigious environment, because experience has informed them they can achieve high academic goals. Alberto's prior achievement is linked to the context of his school, and an experience like his can be better understood using the *big fish little pond effect (BFLPE)* (Marsh, et al., 2008), which states that students' accomplishments are relative and framed to the context where those results are obtained.

> *I was part of the group of talented students. I was one of the students with the lowest marks in that group, but I never failed any module. I always did fine in high-school, so people would say 'Alberto will do fine in economics, he's really good'.*
>
> *(Alberto, T, L, Y2)*

The theoretical premise of the BFLPE predicts students will experience low self-concept if they attend a school where other students show high average ability, compared to equally able students attending schools where the average ability of other students is

low, hence transitioning to academic elitism represents a change that can affect students' self-perception to a great extent.

The School has a particular interest in promoting the programme in feeder schools that have been identified as top schools, based on the historical performance at the School of students who come from those institutions. As Alberto illustrates, being part of a top selected group of students provides valuable information and reaffirms the idea of being an eligible candidate to fit in academic elitism, even though that perception is subject to the context where academic success is achieved.

In asking participants about the strategies to succeed used in their prior academic experiences, there are three elements I identify in the way they achieved their academic success: the effort required to obtain positive outcomes was within students' expected level of engagement, low anxiety levels generated by exams, and confidence to interact with teachers to clarify doubts. Israel and Raquel come from different backgrounds, he attended the top feeder high-school at the UANL, Raquel went to a catholic private school, and both come to study economics feeling confident about their capacity to succeed. The way prior education shapes how students achieve their prior academic success is illustrated in the following quotes.

> *I did things on time, I was more dedicated than smart, to be honest. In high-school*
> *the most valuable part of evaluation was coursework, not exams. I usually went to*
> *bed at 2am and I was very tired… it was all about coursework. (Israel, T, L, Y1)*

and:

> *I was always honour roll, third or second place in my class. I was a dedicated student*
> *and I was used to getting more personalised attention from teachers. I always liked*
> *reading, but in high school I didn't study for exams. I would wake up in the morning*

at 6am and on the day of the exam I would revise, whatever I was able to revise in

that time, and I got really good marks. (Raquel, T, L Y3)

Israel's prior academic experience is characterised by elements of self-efficacy[13] used to succeed. For Israel, prior schooling did not necessarily based achievement on the capacity to pass tests, but on effort and dedication to complete coursework; engagement was key and proved to be sufficient to progress in his studies. Israel identifies himself as a goal-oriented individual, able to cope with academic demands thanks to his organisation skills. It can be observed how prior schooling emphasises effort as an element to succeed, in the form of coursework and readings. On the other hand, Raquel's positive assessment outcomes, despite the limited time dedicated to revise for exams, represents a way to successfully meet academic achievement measurements free from stress and anxiety, and having the opportunity to interact closely with teachers speaks of an environment where teaching staff is involved in a more individual way.

The strategies used to achieve academic success in high-school differ in important ways from the strategies required in higher education in terms of skills, abilities, initiative, and use of time. Students in academic elitism are given more autonomy over their studies, and academic development is heavily measured by means of exams. Assignments require dedication, time organisation, and persistence, they are the product of a process and allow students to integrate their selection of materials and contents within the expectations of the task. Conversely, assessment through exams is subject to elements that require not only the understanding of what is taught, but also memorisation of content, knowing how to use that information, and coping with the conditions of a moment, the time and place where the examination is held influences students' performance, and for some students it is also a matter of luck that cannot be controlled (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2002).

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[13] Bandura's definition of self-efficacy refers to the individual beliefs about their capacities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. (Bandura, 1994)

Despite the possible differences in the way students were taught and assessed in their prior academic experience, there is an elements that can be identified to be shared by all participants: they got positive academic outcomes, they were successful, and they achieved their goal. Students come confident about their academic capacity and do not seem to ponder the appropriateness of skills and abilities required to complete their studies under a different model. This misalignment behind students' struggle in the transition into the academic elitism is a piece of information that only comes clear when difficulties are faced.

> *There were lots of things I learned in high-school, mostly for the admissions exam, but once I was in the School, it was totally different in that teachers were more strict, the hours you have to study, all the readings you have to do, all of that and also the difficulty of modules and coursework you have to complete. It changes radically, so many things I learned from high-school helped me, but there were other things that were not enough. (Ignacio, T, Non-L, Y1)*

Ignacio reports an awareness of the changes required in the early transition stage, and his experience illustrates how prior education can prove to be relevant in terms of the content knowledge acquired, but he finds his prior learning skills are insufficient and inefficient in terms of how to cope with the demands of an intensive academic environment. Ignacio is a traditional student, his father is an academic, his family has high expectations for his future, and investment in education is important. He left home to go to university and has family support in both emotional and economic terms. He can dedicate his time to his studies and reports being socially integrated into the community, with no major distractions that would keep him away from his studies. Despite all the elements identified in favour of academic success and persistence in the course, Ignacio is not able to obtain satisfactory results in his mathematics exam, a subject he was particularly fond of in high-school. He decided to leave the course after a fifth attempt to pass that module.

Ignacio seems to possess all the elements needed to succeed, yet persistence in this course is a complex goal that appears to require academic dispositions not taught by the School nor in his prior education.

> *Some people say 'you didn't make it in Economics' and to be honest it bothers me when people say I couldn't make it. I know I was able to make it, I was just missing something, but I don't know what it was. (Ignacio, T, Non-L, Y1)*

Ignacio experiences a change of context that challenges his self-perception as a *big fish,* and is unable to overcome an academic challenge and unable to identify the missing element for his success. He transferred to another school within the university and enrolled in a course that he identified as a more accessible in terms of time and rigour demanded. He reports his new school is *not as good*, but he is in an environment where he is able to obtain positive academic outcomes, even when his level of effort is lower than what he had experienced in the context of academic elitism.

The variation in the quality of education in Mexico is wide, depending on the nature of the institution attended, private or public, and other characteristics of institutions, such as investment in infrastructure, socioeconomic composition of the student population, and school management (Miranda, Patrinos, & Lopez, 2007). Students at the School of Economics traditionally come from feeder schools, high-schools that are part of the same university system, and even though they are all members of the same system, the preparation varies. The heterogeneity of prior preparation generates complex academic integration issues. Students are not aware of the deficit they bring from prior academic preparation, and the realisation of the need for a change tends to come after experiencing academic failure first-hand.

Instead of adopting a pragmatic preventive approach, with applicable support to help students implement the changes needed, the School promotes a fatalistic environment that sets a barrier to students' permanence (see Chapter 4, section 4.1). As a result of this

practice, students end up working with their limited and sometimes inefficient resources to close the gap between high-school preparation and what the School expects from them. In this regard, Sanford (1967) theory of student development helps understand why students show behaviours of apprehension that end up in the decision to retreat. Sanford suggested that in order for student development to occur, a balance between challenge and support should be presented to students. In the light of this theory, too much support with little levels of challenge could lead to failure in development, and too much challenge without support could cause students to withdraw. Hence, for students to persist in a context that sets high levels of challenge, it is essential to have access to support that will help them overcome the difficulties presented.

In a context that sets high expectations on students' academic performance, but offers very limited support or guidance, students are left on their own to work on remedial strategies, usually with the added stress of failure. When faced with this scenario, students report experiencing feelings of doubt whether their course choice had been the right one, a barrier that will be discussed in detail in the following section.

5.1.2 'I partially liked it, but I also wanted to prove myself': motivations to enrol.

The decision of what course to study is one of the most important decisions a young person can make. Literature suggests prospective university students make the decision of choosing a course based on subjective and objective information, and the more students believe they know about their choice, the less likely they are to search for objective information.

In a study conducted in an Australian university, Brennan (2001) identified that prospective university students who are better informed tend to have higher expectations from their course, generate a better higher education experience, and also face fewer difficulties in their transition to university. In my study, seven out of twelve participants

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state being originally interested in a different area of study, but decided to drift from their original interest based on information received from others.

Course-choice guidance in high-school plays a key source of information that will assist candidates in making their course choice based on student's interest and abilities. Kinzie et al. (2004) report intellectual emphasis, practicality, advice of others, and social emphasis as main elements of influence of career choice. Elements that motivate candidates to choose the degree in economics for the present case include a favourable opinion students have of the quality of the course, career opportunities, earning potential and the advice of others as central elements in the decision of participants.

The decision-making process tends to take place towards the end of the high-school years. Part of the curriculum in high-school requires senior students to visit the school that offers the course they are interested in, in order to interview students and faculty members to obtain relevant information that would help them make a decision. Additionally, for the 2014 admissions process, the students who got the highest scores in the feeder schools identified as top schools at the UANL were sent a personalised letter inviting them to attend an induction seminar on economics, to learn about what the course was about and what the School could offer them.

Diana was the recipient of one of those letters. Her mother, a professional single-parent, sets high standards to be observed at home and at school for Diana and her sister. She reports having a strong culture of effort and being goal oriented. For her, going to university was not only a matter of completing a level of education, but about making an effort and being challenged to excel:

> *I wanted to study International Relations at the School of Politics, but I was*
>
> *concerned about the perception of the students from that school. My aspirations*
>
> *were really high (…) I had been looking for something where I could give my 100%,*

so I assumed economics was a very difficult challenge, and it was a combination, I

partially liked it, but I also wanted to prove myself. (Diana, T, L, Y2)

Diana's choice of course was primarily based on the reputation of the course and the prestige of the School, captivated by the idea of the rigour and quality of the teaching and learning environment, she overlooked the fact that she did not have a clear idea of what economics was about, and eventually this led her the decision had been poorly made. She reports feeling able to persist but her lack of enthusiasm over the subject area was a decisive element. There are two observable forces in the decision to enrol and then leave the course for a student like Diana. On the one hand, the prestige and the opportunity to demonstrate her intellectual capacity worked as the initial pull force to enrol in the course, but as she made progress, the realisation of her low interest in the area of study resulted in a loss of motivation, which eventually supported her decision to leave, as the effort required to stay was no longer beneficial for her. The commitment Diana had was with her need to prove herself, and even though the prestige of the institution made it appealing for her to be part of this community, the low interest in this area of study was her reason to leave the course.

Leaving the course does not represent for Diana a sense of not being prepared for it, and she reports clear signs of social and academic integration. In her interview, she shows her contentment with the decision and no negative expressions accompany her discourse. This illustrates a relevant point regarding course choice as a reason for leaving the course, considering decisions are fallible and subject to adjustments, and in such cases, the earlier students realise they have enrolled in a course that is not of their interest, the fewer resources (time, money and effort) students and institutions will divert from their goals.

For other students, the influence of others can lead young people to make career choices that are not aligned with their interests. Ada identifies herself as a good student who turned mediocre in high-school. She admits her prior academic education was

demanding, but also acknowledges that during high-school her good study habits gave way to academic misconduct and a lack of effort. Both of her parents hold an undergraduate degree, her brother was already studying at the School of Economics, and one of her cousins had recently graduated from the same programme. For Ada, the influence of others in choosing economics was a central element:

> *I wanted to study International Relations, which is the course I'm studying now, but people always told me it was a saturated area of study, and it would be hard for me to get a job, and my brother is actually studying in this School (economics) and my cousin too, so that helped me go for economics. (Ada, T, L, Y1)*

It only took Ada one semester to realise that the better job opportunities that economics could offer were not enough incentive for her to stay. The dissatisfaction generated by the mismatch between her area of interest and her choice was the strongest reason for her to leave the course at an early stage. This dissatisfaction is accompanied by a low engagement, and this behaviour eventually leads to irregular academic progression and academic failure. Literature on non-completion observes how low levels of satisfaction generated by a mismatch between student's expectation and what they obtain from the course lead to the decision to withdraw (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998).

Getting an education for students like Diana and Ada is not only a matter of gaining prestige or earning potential, it is about being passionate about the field of studies, it is about vocation, a scenario associated with high dropout rates in the first year of studies (Yorke, 1999). Both Diana and Ada made the decision to transfer to a course of their interest. None of them reports feeling disappointed about the value of the experience at the School of Economics, their decision comes from the confirmation that the course they enrolled into is not their true vocation. Non-completion is latent in students who oversee the importance of their interest in the subject area, and this exemplifies the need to understand how the choice is made.

In her experience, Ada reports the course-choice guidance module in high-schools resulted misleading and confusing for her, and she makes a call to instructors in being careful with the information they present to young people making a course-choice.

> *In high-school teachers put a lot of pressure on what you have to study, and which courses are worth studying or not. If I want to study a degree, it shouldn't be determined by the expected income. (Ada, T, L Y1)*

For a student like Ada, who comes from a middle-class socioeconomic background, guaranteeing an income is not the most important element to consider in choosing a degree, but to follow an interest that has been present for a long time. For Ada, choosing to transfer to a different course obeys a personal interest and is not considered a failure but an *adjustment* in her trajectory, and leaving the course is considered a positive move.

The need to prove themselves, to follow the advice of influential adults on the importance of studying a degree with earning potential is found to be a weak reasons to choose a course and is identified as a potential risk of non-completion. Diana and Ada are part of the statistics of non-completion for this particular course, but in the macro perspective their decision is more of a course-choice issue and not a barrier to completion. The more and better information students receive in the process of choosing their course, the less likely students will find themselves in this scenario. Course-choice guidance practitioners and those responsible for promoting the course amongst candidate students have an area of opportunity to improve their information practices, and avoid misguiding students in their decision.

5.1.3 'I thought it was business oriented': expectations of the course

There are different channels to obtain information on the course prior to registration, and that information helps build expectations of the course. The information that guides the decision is in many cases subjective, based on the symbolic value that a person of influence

gives to the course, in most cases family or teachers. Another type of information used to guide the decision was the opinion of peers, the promise of a good job, and even the appearance of the building where the School is located[14].

I saw the facilities and they were nice, modules looked good, you come out and get a good job, but I didn't know much, I enrolled because I thought it was business oriented, but once I was there it was not like they present it. (Israel, T, L, Y1)

Israel went to the most privileged high-school at the UANL, ranked the top public high-school in the country. Aspirations among students in that institution are high. In the interview, he emphasised his life was about becoming a professional, and his interest in doing business and making money in combination with his studies were observed in his life from an early age. Israel's vision for his future makes an understandable match with the regional culture, Monterrey being a business-oriented city (see Chapter 2, section 2.7), but it is clearly misaligned with the academic orientation of the course. The lack of clarity students have on what the course is about represents a risk of dropout, since expectations on the course are based on subjective information and misunderstandings. Israel illustrates how some students come to the School of Economics as a path to prepare for a professional life in a business-oriented environment, when in fact economics follows a neoclassical curriculum based on the study of theoretical models through a heavy use of mathematical analysis.

My mother didn't want me to change, she was very proud, but I realised I saw myself like that, doing something that is not my thing. Why lose so much time when this is a good time to transfer and start in a different place. In my family everyone has a

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[14] The building that hosts the School of Economics is one of the most recent and modern building at the UANL, a characteristic that may convey an image of higher status, and makes it more appealing.

degree, I told my parents I wanted to drop out, get a job, save some money, set up a

business (Israel, T,L, Y1)

The lack of clarity regarding the scope and content of the course builds expectations that cannot be fulfilled, in this case the misconception that economics is about doing business and making money. The misalignment between expectations and reality is a documented reason to leave the course, and Israel illustrates how some *leavers* even consider not completing an education and feeling confident about their future following a more entrepreneurial pathways to success without formal education.

5.2 Student related barriers

Literature on student retention highlights the relevance of institutional action to improve rates of students' completion, but when the discussion of retention shifts to a discussion of persistence, students take a more active role in the process. This approach is becoming more vocal in recent years, and it implies asking different questions, particularly regarding what needs to be done so that more students want to persist (Tinto, 2016). For non-residential universities, the decision to stay or leave depends not only on what happens within university, but on elements beyond the influence of the institution. This situation requires higher education institutions to understand how students' experiences shape the reasons to persist, and understanding is the first step to guide effective actions to promote persistence.

Literature on dropout from higher education suggests that students who show low levels of commitment to the goal of graduating are at risk of withdrawing from higher education (Tinto, 1993) and poor study skills and time management are identified as elements that affect students' readiness to independent learning and eventually lead to academic difficulties that can be associated to dropout. Bean and Eaton (2001) suggest that in order to integrate both socially and academically to the institution, students need to

develop self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and overall how to approach the demands of the course. In this regard, institutions are expected to contribute to the development of those attributes, and theoretical retention models rely on institutions to contribute to the success of students.

In the context of the present study, I find three salient student-related barriers that contribute to understand how students build the decision to leave the course. Those barriers are summarised in Table 5.3 and will be discussed in detail in this section.

Table 5.3 Student-related barriers identified among leavers

Goal commitment	Poor self-regulating behaviours	Dealing with adversity
-Importance of becoming an economist -Lack of clarity of goal, no purpose	-No planning, monitoring or correction of direction of learning -Passive process of learning (externally directed)	-Academic buoyancy -Academic resilience

Source: Elaborated by author

5.2.1 'For me, it's about shaping yourself': weak goals and commitment.

Experiences shared by students exemplify how some of them come to this School following an idea of being part of something extraordinary, the idea of following the footsteps of presidents or having a job of high impact, but without a concrete realistic goal that could help sustain a motivation to persist. For other students, studying economics represents a challenge, a task that seems to require attributes that differentiate them from others, with no specific purpose of application or utility, but as a way to signal themselves as high achievers. Participants provide examples of how they find in economics an opportunity of recognition and access to power through knowledge. Their interests lie on doing something considered of great importance, and this particular degree is the pathway they identify to achieve that goal.

Economics encompasses the whole purchasing and selling systems, everything that

makes a country grow or a company grow or go bankruptcy, I wanted to be part of

it, part of a company that grows. (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)

and*:*

I always liked reading news on politics, so when I started showing interest I would

observe this president is an economist, and that other president was an economist

too, so let's do economics. (Alberto, T, L, Y2)

The quotes presented above exemplify how students come with an aspirational goal of becoming an economist in order to reach an objective perceived as grand. Gaining admission to the degree of their choice is an initial achievement, but the commitment required to meet the goals needs to be sustained in order to overcome the challenges of academic and social integration (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995). Both first-generation and traditional students who come to the School of Economics express an initial commitment to the goal of becoming an economics, but when this commitment is subject to the pressures of academic or social integration, the intention of persisting is at risk. When the goal of graduating is not an initial intention, this is, when students do not see a utility in achieving the completion of the programme, it is likely to see behaviours that influence the decision to leave the course.

I see getting an education to model yourself as a person, not necessarily to become

the Minister of Finance or something like that, a lot of people compete for that, but

for me it's about shaping yourself. (Ricardo, FG, T, Y2)

The idea of going to university as an experience of shaping you as a person can be achieved regardless of the degree studied, and for Ricardo, becoming an economist was not as important as gaining the benefits of a university experience. For students whose goal is not obtaining a degree, leaving the course can be understood as a decision when students

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do not feel they fit in the institution. Bean and Eaton (2001) explain that for students to sustain the intention to persist it takes a commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduating, together with an institutional fit. This means that having achieved positive academic integration and social integration, students also strengthen their loyalty to the institution and to the goal of graduating. For Ricardo, the negative outcomes in terms of academic performance, and the isolation experienced as a first-generation student who feels out of place combine with a weak commitment to the goal of becoming an economist. Under this scenario, leaving is understood as a combination of poor institutional fit and a weak commitment to the goal of graduating from a specific course.

Without a clear or realistic goal, the intention to persist weakens. When students are unable to identify what they are going to do with a degree, a loss of direction is experienced, an element identified to push students to make the decision to leave.

5.2.2 'I wanted to be an economist, but wanting is not enough': poor self-regulating behaviour

Success in higher education is associated with having a goal, and goals help individuals focus on achievement. The absence of this drive to complete a goal is linked to a lack of readiness for independent learning (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005), including low levels of self-regulating behaviours. Self-regulation implies purposive behaviours that are planned, adapted and evaluated (Zimmerman, 2000), and students who left the course show behaviours that exhibit a fail to plan, monitor and correct the direction of their actions towards learning:

> *If I had four free hours in the afternoon that I could use to study, perhaps I would take a nap for two hours and instead of sleeping at 10pm I had to go to bed at midnight for not having used my time wisely. (Hilda, FG, L, Y3)*

and*:*

> *There were other classmates who allocated more time to study, they would spend all*
>
> *the time, all the time, their persistence, was the difference… other activities were*
>
> *valuable to me, I would teach religion, I still do, I really liked it and I would make*
>
> *time for that, I spent a lot of my time in church. (Alba, FG, L, Y2)*

Both Alba and Hilda provide examples of how students who fail to see the priority the School demands in the way time is spent have a higher risk of falling short in meeting the requirements of the course. Academic development is a time consuming activity (Britton & Tesser, 1991), with readings, course work and exams preparation as part of the course. The demands that university environments are subject to change throughout an academic year, this is, students experience peaks that demand more effort and time, i.e. exams periods and assignment deadlines, and for students who are first-generation in higher education, the lack of knowledge regarding this dynamic could represent an important disadvantage.

Time management is a skill linked to positive academic outcomes (Britton & Tesser, op. cit.), and because it is a skill that can be developed, it becomes a key learning in the transition process to academic elitism, a key action point not only for the student but for the institution interested in promoting student persistence. A missed opportunity to promote learner development is a missed opportunity to contribute to positive academic outcomes, institutional fit and intentions to persistence.

Additional to efficient use of time, students' self-regulating behaviours also help assess options and prioritise activities that will offer better revenues to students' academic goals, but not all students come prepared to take that control and have not learnt to self-regulate their academic studying:

> *In our mind we had the priority of studying, but once we were there, we would grab*
>
> *a ball and hit the sports courts… lessons were tedious for me. (Alberto, T, L, Y2)*

In a new academic context where students are not monitored by grown-ups, it can be easy to get diverted from responsibilities if students have not developed the ability to set priorities, assess and amend the direction of their efforts. Zimmerman (2002) discusses how self-regulation helps students set goals, improve time management, learning strategies, self-evaluation, how to seek for help and information, and other learning processes that can be learnt. Institutions interested in reducing dropout could benefit from investing time in supporting students develop those self-regulatory processes, and this commitment becomes more relevant in face of a heterogeneous student population.

The point I find important to emphasise here is the disadvantage many students experience in coming to a context of high academic rigour, a context with academic demands that are very different from what was known to them before, and being informed on how hard courses are and how demanding the School is could probably serve a stage of awareness, but it does not necessarily trigger the development of fundamental skill to improve their learning processes.

> *Some people were always reading, or studying and they had a reason, they had a commitment to achieve what they were looking for, you come with an idea of wanting to do something, but an idea is not enough, you have to make an effort and that's what happened in my case, I guess I wanted to be an economist, but wanting is not enough, you have to work for it. (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)*

Students can be taught to be self-regulated learners (Zimmerman, 2002), but it takes both student and institutional interest to achieve this, and the process requires interaction and feedback. Considering other elements discussed before in this study, such as self-exclusion, shame, and the clash of *habitus* between the student and the institution, the difficulties of achieving learner development without a systematic process becomes more evident. The expectation that the student will come up with ways to develop themselves perpetuates the disadvantage experienced by less-privileged students.

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5.2.3 'Just like in Jenga, somebody pulls a piece and your tower collapses': dealing with adversity.

Choosing to stay on the course is as important as having the capacity to adapt to the new environment. Both elements are observed to be necessary to develop learning strategies that contribute to obtain positive academic outcomes. But for students to achieve this development it is important to consider the ability to sustain the motivation and effort needed despite adversities. The final student-related barrier I will discuss is linked to the difficulties students experience in facing adversities that impact their experience as university students.

It has been established that students at the School of Economics come from a relatively successful background, and in their past academic experiences they report limited times when they have faced difficulties. While this could be considered a positive element that builds an identity of confidence, the opposite can be said in terms of the limited opportunities students have had to develop the ability to adapt their behaviours and attitudes in order to overcome difficulties, challenges, and setbacks.

It was earlier discussed how Ignacio's challenge was purely academic, and bounded to one module only he is unable to pass. For Ignacio, not being able to identify what is required from him to achieve a satisfactory grade represents a panorama of losing control over how to approach this challenge, and the final outcome of this situation is linked to the decision of leaving.

> *I did my best and I strived, perhaps I had to make a greater effort or perhaps my mind was blocked in exams, I don't know for sure. (Ignacio, T, Non-L, Y1)*

A question that emerges regarding a system of six opportunities to pass a module is the way students and academics approach this opportunities system, whether they see it as a safety net in case unexpected adversities emerge, or if it becomes a mechanism that traps students in a false sense of opportunity and emphasises students' individual deficit.

Data in this research is limited and does not allow to answer such query, but what I identify among students is a reactive approach to exams, and not a proactive approach. Students tend to wait to change their learning and studying strategies as a reaction to exams results, and fall into a situation of chronic exam failure that brings along stress, anxiety and loss of control. The importance of collaboration between academics and student to identify the key facilitators of positive educational outcomes that include a healthy school environment becomes a fundamental piece in the processes to reduce intentions to leave the course.

Raquel's experience exemplifies a case of a student who is willing to make an effort in order to persist, and academic struggles do not prevent her from trying again. In her time as student in this course, Raquel has developed academic buoyancy, understood as the capacity to overcome setbacks that are considered typical of the ordinary course of life (Martin and Marsh, 2008). However, she reports an interaction that had an impact on her willingness to persist. In her third year, she had to face a mitigating circumstance that affected her capacity to focus on an exam, and after approaching the lecturer to ask for the opportunity to deter her evaluation, she was denied the opportunity and was told she had to sit the exam or choose to fail. The personal situation she was going through impaired her performance and as a consequence she failed the exam, which was a fourth opportunity.

> *I fell in love with the course being there, struggling, when I was told I was not going to make it I'd say 'yes I will make it', my interest grew as semesters went by, leaving did not cross my mind. You have everything in order and just like in Jenga, somebody pulls a piece and your tower collapses, that type of thing... it was something that made me lose my emotional balance. (Raquel, T, L, Y3)*

Raquel went through many adversities from the start, the feeling of rejection for being a woman with a profile not promoted in this environment, the difficulty to integrate socially into the School community, and overcoming chronic failure are elements that build

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up to the moment of facing this final setback that leaves her with a sense of lack of control. Retention models explain the importance of feedback for students to redirect their efforts, and the role played by the institution in guiding students to achieve better results. However, in this School students are left to work on their own, changes are reactive and not proactive, the process is individual, and the fatalistic discourse used to welcome students in their first week in School becomes a *self-fulfilled* prophecy.

5.3 Home related barriers

The final set of elements identified to have an influence on the decision to leave is associated to students' home environment. Most students in public higher education in Mexico stay local and live with their family, there are no residences to offer accommodation to students. This characteristic represents one of the main differences compared to residential universities referred to in most of the literature on dropout in higher education. While for some students living at home represents the opportunity to be provided with basic needs of food, shelter, being looked after, and receiving emotional support, staying home also involves a dynamic of commitments, family duties, and financial issues that impact students' experience at university.

For students in a commuter university, moving from their family context to the School context on a daily basis represents a scenario that poses an additional identity fragmentation for students whose familial *habitus* diverts in important ways to the School *habitus*. Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) introduced the perspective of mature students who face challenges that incorporate family and work responsibilities, a situation that prevents them from fully integrating into the School context, and suggest those students require guidance to help them identify if they have made the right choice.

In the category of home-related barriers, I observe two elements to influence students' decision to leave the course, summarised in Table 5.4. This section will present

evidence on how those home-based elements contribute to the construction of barriers to completion.

Table 5.4 Home-related barriers experienced by leavers

Economic situation at home	Home and School *habitus* misalignment
-Need to contribute to family income -Insufficient resources to support demands of academic elitism	-Practices at home clash with School expectations -Limited knowledge on how higher education works -Comparing siblings' academic outcome adds shame and pressure

Source: Elaborated by author

5.3.1 'It was always the money': economic situation at home.

In a country where 43.6% of the population lives in poverty conditions, it is not surprising to learn that students who come to university from a low socioeconomic background face serious economic difficulties. Nuevo León, the state where this study takes place, is a privileged one, with only 14.2% of its population living in poverty conditions, yet students at the School of Economics are not exempt of this adversity.

The University, through *Fundación UANL* and the Federal Government have scholarship programmes to support students who face economic difficulties to pay for their education, and in their discourse it is stated that no student should be left out for not having the resources to pay for their university fees. But the problem faced by students in this context goes beyond paying for fees, and in some cases students are immerse in a situation where they are expected to contribute to the family income. This scenario sets a challenge of large scale implications for a School that expects students to be enrolled full-time. With limited institutional and government programmes that can provide financial support for living expenses, and given the extent of economic needs, students like Ricardo face a high risk of dropout.

As soon as I started the first time I had to leave for a year, I had to work. With very

little of my savings, because most of the money ended up in the household, I went

back to School. It was like an agreement at home, like I gave you some money, now

can you support me for a while? (Ricardo, FG,local, Y2)

Ricardo provides an example of how a disadvantaged economic situation

accompanied by other barriers of academic and social integration nature have major

implications for the chances students have to stay in education. At home, Ricardo's mother

offered what he calls *moral support,* encouragement and the idea that getting an education

was good for his future, but he had to find the financial means to stay in school, i.e. fees,

books, school supplies, transportation, to name a few. Being a first-generation student

meant he had no information on how university scholarship programmes work. The lack of

information on scholarship applications represents a loss for students who face the need for

financial support. Additionally, the fact that scholarships require students to maintain a

minimum grade average that is hardly achieved even by the better prepared students in this

School represents a dead end path for students in such situation.

Other students, like Daniel, have the economic support at home to pay for the fees

and daily costs of going to school, such as cost for transportation. Nevertheless, living in an

area of difficult access also implies costs in term of time, a resource identified by Astin

(1999) as fundamental for students to be involved with their educational experience. The

limitations in economic capital also represent limited resources available at home to support

their studies, namely access to books, a computer, a place assigned to study, and in this

digital era, access to internet. These limitations have important implications for students'

academic development.

It would take me two hours to get to school, maybe more if I missed the bus, and I

had to get there early. In the first weeks it was hard for me, I didn't have the books,

so I would make photocopies or would borrow them from friends, and I would read

in that moment prior to class, 10 or 15 minutes before class. (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)

It is not only the limitations in the economic resources what affected Daniel in this sense, but other elements related to his socioeconomic status. Living far from school and in an area with reduced access to public transportation represented a high cost for him in terms of time invested to commute on a daily basis. In the literature on dropout from education, little is known on the impact long commutes have on intentions to leave. Pokorny, Holley and Kane (2017) find commuter students do not report geographic distance to represent an important factor affecting their experience, and suggest the struggle is rather on the negotiation of relationships with home, family and community. Conversely, research on employees turnover shows long commutes are a major cause of low performance and turnover problems (Connor, et al., 2003; Purba, 2015), and these findings rise the question on the importance of this issue on student dropout intention.

In most studies on dropout from higher education, literature focuses on what commuter students lose out of the university experience in terms of social integration and the development of a sense of belonging, but little is discussed on the daily struggle students have to face, including poor provision of public transportation and other issues beyond the university experience that have an impact on academic performance, such as tardiness, tiredness and the opportunity cost of making a long commute.

Another aspect to consider as a challenge to students from low socioeconomic status is the investment of resources on *cultural capital*. The difficulty Daniel experienced in buying books can be understood in terms of limited economic resources, but also limited *cultural capital*. Buying books needed for his studies is not a priority in the assignment of economic resources, and not knowing how to take advantage of the library services at School represents a missed opportunity to prepare for his lessons and academic development. Daniel reports receiving no guidance in School on how to approach his situations, and the

assumption that students should know how to deal with these deficits illustrates the limited

involvement the School has in the transition to university of less-privileged students, a stage

reported in literature to be particularly difficult for students who do not have a support

framework (Robotham & Julian, 2006; Thomas & Quinn, 2007)

There is also the case of students who have the financial support needed to go to

university at the start of the course, but unexpected situations call for their involvement to

contribute to the family income. In her second year, Hilda's father lost his job, and to

support her family she took a part time job, which meant she was no longer able to attend

the afternoon sessions, *laboratorios*. With her new responsibility at home, she started to

miss lectures and struggled to find the time to complete her coursework. Hilda reports an

initial intention to continue with her studies. At the time of going through that situation of

need, Hilda's mother played a role of influence in her decision to leave the course:

> *My mother encouraged me to take that time to think if economics was what I really*
>
> *wanted to do for life, she said 'I want you to do what you enjoy', and that time*
>
> *helped me remember my first option was journalism … now I think leaving the*
>
> *School of Economics was a necessary evil to follow my dream. (Hilda, FG, local, Y3)*

It was a financial need what pushed Hilda to first take a step back from her studies,

and the realisation that economics was not her first choice emerged and became the reason

behind her decision to leave the course. This is a retrospective account of a decision that at

the time represented a sense of failure in her life, in her words Hilda reports *I felt I had*

failed in my life, my world came apart, it was sad, a very hard process. Trying to disentangle

what is behind the decision to leave in a case like this is a complex task. Hilda experienced

doubts regarding career choice until her third year in the course, before that she reports

academic and financial struggles contrasted with the gains of a highly stimulating academic

environment, a solid social integration and sense of belonging. The reassurance her mother

encouraged her to choose what she identifies as *her dream,* and the process does not

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necessarily represent a barrier to completion, but an introspective exercise that helped her choose a path that worked better for her, the definition of her true vocation.

Eleven out of the twelve students who left the course in this study enrolled in a different course or continued the same course in a different institution, and at the time of completion of this thesis, seven of them had successfully completed their course. This reflects the relatively privileged economic position students in this context have compared to the rest of the country, yet for some unprivileged students completing a course in higher education is an option beyond their possibilities.

Supporting students who face economic difficulties is a challenge that goes beyond the efforts of a single institution, and in the context of a country that faces poverty in large scale, it is a situation that calls for considerations of national factors that impact the socioeconomic environment in which students' decision to stay or leave higher education are made.

5.3.2 'Never mind your exam, let's have a BBQ': habitus misalignments.

The lack of involvement of parents in higher education is known to occur particularly among first-generation students, whose parents do not have the experience of going to university and cannot offer students the guidance that better prepared parents can provide to their children. Nevertheless, evidence in this study offers a different insight into the relevance of parents' prior experience with higher education and the assumed advantage it represents for students.

It has been stated in the literature that students who are first-generation to go to university face a disadvantage over those students who have highly educated parents, in terms of how much *cultural capital* they have and their understanding of how university works (Pascarella , Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). For the context of this study, I find evidence that supports those findings and how that lack of

cultural capital poses a challenge to students who have to negotiate between the expected

behaviours and values of a School of academic elitism, and the expectations and

dispositions of the familial *habitus*:

> *There was nobody telling me 'you have to do this, because I've been through it and*
>
> *these are the consequences,' and at the time of studying for my exams my dad*
>
> *would come and say 'let's have a BBQ' but I'd say I had an exam and he'd reply*
>
> *'never mind, let's have a BBQ', it was like he didn't care. (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)*

Parents assumption that coursework takes places in School and home time can be

dedicated to other activities is understood as a lack of knowledge parents have on what it

takes to succeed in higher education. However, the premise that students whose parents

have some experience in higher education tend to have a better understanding on the need

to spend more time to meet coursework demands is not always observed in the experience

of students in this study. Alberto provides an example of how parents' prior experience in

higher education is not enough to understand academic elitism:

> *My mother studied to become a secretary, my dad went to university, but the level of*
>
> *demand he faced was not at all like the School, they were not aware of the level*
>
> *demanded, I told them it was hard, but since I had always done well in school before,*
>
> *they said 'he knows what he's doing.' (Alberto, T, L, Y2)*

Alberto was left on his own at home, expected to know how to take control over his

studies. Even though his parents did not push him to divert his time from studies, the

negative influence he was receiving from peers in School was not identified by his parents as

a case of low levels of engagement with coursework, but it was associated with Alberto's

ease to do well in his studies, and that kept parents unaware of the academic struggle he

was going through. Parents' experiences in higher education are far from the experiences

lived by their children, this represents a challenge to the advantage literature assigns to

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students whose parents have been to university. Educational attainment as a measurement of *cultural capital* depends on the features of the educational experience, as it is found in this study.

A final home-related element I identified among students who left the course is one related to accountability students feel to their parents, but a kind of accountability that is transformed into shame, anxiety and fear of failure. Alba is the first one in the family to go to university, her parents have set high expectations on her, and she becomes the pride of the family. Her mother had been to an information session, and meeting her parents' expectations becomes a source of pressure and anxiety for Alba:

> *They would say 'you are the first person in our family to have a degree', they didn't*
> *say it directly, but it was like 'my daughter is studying here' they would always say it*
> *as an opener, my mother would say that to her friends, dad at work, and it was a*
> *burden for me. (Alba, FG, L, Y2)*

Wartman and Savage (2008) offer a literature review on parental involvement in higher education in the USA, and make for the argument that institutions could benefit from involving parents in a more collaborative way. They suggest students whose parents are involved in their university experience tend to observe better chances to succeed in their social and academic activities within School. There is a differentiation between parents of first-generation students and parents of upper-middle-class students, and how both vary in their approach to involvement, with first-generation students reporting 'too little' involvement of their parents, an element that is also found in the context of my study.

In this study, I observe the situation for some students is not that of a limited involvement of parents, but a negative type of involvement. Daniel reports being made fun of at home when he failed a module for the third time. Not only did he experience a fragmentation between the familial and the School *habitus*, but his academic struggle turned him into a target of family pressure. His parents and siblings, who lacked experience

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in higher education, compared him to other students they knew who went to university and did well, they compared to other experiences in different school and left aside the particularities of high academic demand implied in the environment of the School of Economics. Literature makes reference to helicopter parents who are constantly surveying their children performance (Wartman & Savage, 2008), but Daniel is not subject to a pressure that aims at encouraging him to improve, it is rather a form of bullying experienced at home.

> *I was the one who would reach the furthest among the members of the family, and then one day I come home and say 'you know dad, I am now suspended and I want to transfer to another school', it was a bomb, they made uncomfortable comments making fun of me when I failed. (Daniel, FG, L, Y1)*

For some students, home adds negative elements to the experience of being a student in a challenging academic environment that requires an intensive student engagement. The lack of economic resources feels beyond solution for a student who is expected to be enrolled full-time and at the same time is expected to contribute to the family income. The many restrictions that accompany a low socioeconomic environment at home, including the high costs in term of time to commute on a daily basis, and the limited familial *cultural capital*, understood as the set of activities and competencies associated with the dominant classes, hinders students' transition to a School that fails to accommodate to the needs of students with this profile.

Parents' educational attainment is not an evident measurement of *cultural capital* for the transition into academic elitism in higher education, as it can only be accounted as relevant *cultural capital* to the extent parents' experience in higher education resembles that of their children and is able to contribute to the development of relevant *academic capital* for the academic progression needed in order to stay in academic elitism.

Summary

In this chapter I presented a discussion of barriers that students come across beyond what is observed at School. For first-generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, integrating into a School with dispositions predominantly aligned with a middle or higher socioeconomic background becomes an immediate barrier to completion, and their limited access to financial support reduces their opportunities to stay. Additionally, the misalignment between practices and expectations at home and those at School mean that students who do not develop strategies to overcome this challenge report reduced opportunities to stay when facing circumstances perceived beyond their control.

Prior academic experiences have an influence on students' self-concept of success. Students' identity as high achievers signals them as individuals who can cope with high challenges, and enrolling into a course with a discourse of high academic elitism to prove themselves is a motivation to enrol identified among students who voluntarily leave the course. For students who identify at an early stage that their course-choice was not optimal, the decision to leave is experienced as a positive one. Choosing a course based on expectations of employability and income potential is not sufficient if students do not feel an interest in their studies.

Student-related barriers help understand how the commitment to a goal and the capacity to self-regulate behaviours affect how efforts diminish and divert from the original purpose. Finally, the section on home barriers explores how limitations in terms of economic capital play an important role in the intentions to leave, with limited financial support available and the need to provide at home faced by students. The misalignment between the dispositions at home and those expected at School represent for students an additional struggle in trying to reconcile forces that prevent them from fully integrating to School. Table 5.5 presents a summary of non-school related barriers and a brief description of each barrier.

Table 5.5 Non-school related barriers to completion experienced by leavers

BARRIERS	HOW IT IS EXPERIENCED BY STUDENTS
Pre-University barriers	In their prior academic experience, students are required a level of effort and engagement within their expectations, but lower to the demands faced at School. They experience a *big-fish-little-pond* effect. The strategies used to achieve academic success in their pre-university experiences prove to be insufficient to meet the demands of the course. Awareness of the changes needed is limited before starting the course. Two salient motivations to enrol characterise students who leave the course early: the perspective of a position of influence and power as an economist, and the need to prove themselves. Evidence also suggests students develop an idea of the course based on subjective information, this generates expectations that cannot be fulfilled.
Student-related barriers	A weak commitment to graduating as an economist is an identified reason to leave the course. Students who face doubts in their course choice and see no clear purpose to stay express intentions to leave at an early stage. Even for those who express an interest in the course, poor self-regulating behaviours result in the inability to set priorities and amend learning processes. Students who show a passive process of learning and expect others to lead the way fall behind, and changes to their behaviours tend to come as a late reaction to negative academic and social integration outcomes. Academic buoyancy and resilience accompany the process of making changes to adapt to the demands of the course, but facing situations where students experience a loss of control can prove to have an impact on their willingness to persist.
Home-related barriers	A challenging economic situation at home and the need to contribute to family income are hardly compatible with a School that demands high levels of engagement, including a full-time enrolment. Insufficient resources in terms of economic and *cultural capital* to support academic elitism evidences a problem of socioeconomic dimensions beyond the individual and the School. Familial *habitus* clashes with School *habitus*, and parents not only have a limited involvement in students' transition into higher education, but sometimes pose a negative involvement as a result of limited knowledge on how higher education works.

Source: Elaborated by author

Enrolling in a course that attracts students with high achievement profiles results into a situation where the effect of being a *big fish in a little pond* in high-school dilutes. Students are now in an environment where their academic *uniqueness* is no longer there, and it challenges their identity, within the context of the school. Students from less-prepared academic backgrounds become the small fish in a little pond of big fish. This situation calls for changes in behaviours and attitudes, and students who are unable to take control over their studies in a more autonomous way fail to meet the high demands of the course. The consequences of academic failure trigger a snow ball effect that works in detriment of academic progress. The commitment to the goal of becoming an economics determines levels of effort, time spent on studying, and dedication to the task, but the low academic outcomes hinder the capacity individuals have to overcome academic setbacks, and in turn this lack of academic buoyancy and resilience becomes an influential element in the intention to leave the course.

In academic elitism, individuals are exposed to high levels of demand that pose high probabilities of failure. Being prepared to overcome failure, becoming buoyant and resilient, are important skills that students with a background of success do not always have developed in the context of this study. The *doxa* of the School promotes a culture of individualism, and the provision of support is not a priority of a culture that expects students to stay by their own merits, and for students in disadvantaged circumstances, this is translated into an imminent departure.

6. Learning to Howl: What Works to Overcome Barriers to Completion in Academic Elitism

In previous chapters I have presented the experience of students who decided to leave the course and the barriers identified to have contributed to their decision to leave. In this chapter, I explore the experience of ten students who completed the course, and I discuss the barriers they faced and what worked for them to overcome difficulties to persist and complete the course. *Persisters* (see Table 6.1) come from diverse backgrounds. Seven out of ten enrolled at age 17, and only four out of ten participants graduated within the timeframe set by the School, nine semesters. They all graduated between 2010 and 2015

Table 6.1 Persisters grouped by type and time to complete the course

	First generation	Traditional
Local	Marco, lagged behind Sandra, lagged behind Roberto, 9 semesters	Ana, 9 semesters David, lagged behind Adriana, 9 semesters Oscar, lagged behind
Non-Local	Elisa, lagged behind Natalia, 9 semesters	Nicolás, 9 semesters

Source: Elaborated by author with information from the interviews

Findings in this chapter resonate with the literature on student retention in terms of the supportive role played by friends and peers in helping students complete the course (Buote et al., 2007; Black & MacKenzie, 2008), and similar to what was discussed in the *leavers* experience, *persisters* report a limited institutional support. Students who complete the course report a sense of survival and pride, accompanied by signs of personal loss associated with difficulties coping with academic demands and the loss of self-confidence experienced in the process.

Family is an important source of support that helps participants overcome the sense of failure, and the reassurance of having the financial support from parents, or at least not facing the need to provide an income at home, is a characteristic shared by all *persisters*. The capacity to become resilient is identified as a key personal element to succeed, developed through guidance from adults that are close to the student, usually outside school, or from peers. *Persisters* share barriers identified in the experiences of students who left the course, however, they refer to difficulties as a trigger of changes in behaviours and attitudes towards academic challenges, although it is not clear for them to identify the process to achieve that change. It is the *individual* and not the institution who takes responsibility for developing what is needed to become self-taught and resilient to succeed in completing the course.

The overall experience reported is that students are left on their own to find the means to succeed, and what defines attainment is their capacity to adapt to a strongly individualistic institution. In the following sections I discuss four sets of facilitators identified to have helped participants overcome barriers to completion. *Persisters* do not make reference to negative home factors as a barrier, for these students the reference to home elements is rather positive and an important support for continuation in their time as students. Parents' low knowledge on how the university system works is compensated with full financial and emotional support. I observe the encouragement of hard working parents serves to generate in their children a sense of accountability for the support received at home.

What works for students to overcome barriers to completion is internalising the *habitus* of academic elitism, developing resilience and taking control over their studies, also the development of social capital in the form of peer-support, and home advantages (see Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Types of facilitators experienced by *persisters*

Peer support	Student-based facilitators	Internalisation of School *habitus*	Home-based facilitators
-Strategic grouping, develop sense of belonging -From bridging to bonding social capital -Learning to howl: community learning	-Commitment to becoming an economist -Self-efficacy -Resilience	-Internalise lecturers' expectations -Strategic approach to exams	-Financial support -Accountability to parents

Source: Elaborated by author

6.1 Peer-support

The role of peers as providers of positive support and mentoring is identified in the literature on retention and persistence in higher education as an opportunity to engage students more actively in their studies and university life, hence promoting persistence (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Thomas, 2002; Thomas, 2012). Research-guided practice suggests higher education institutions benefit from fostering efficient peer to peer mentoring and learning communities (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schabmann, Spiel, & Carbon, 2011; Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993;), where learning becomes a shared activity within the classroom and beyond, and all members of the community have something valuable to add, an approach that puts learning at the centre of all activities at the institution.

When asked directly about what helped them face challenges and overcome the barriers experienced during their time as students, *persisters* made reference to the importance of the relationship with peers and the support received from them. The support received was not limited to academic matters, but also in dealing with emotional difficulties, particularly whenever they doubted both their willingness to stay and their academic capacity to meet the requirements of course. Peers become a source of guidance to

complement formal instruction in the classroom, and they are an important source of help for less-prepared students who need help to improve their academic skills.

This section discusses three elements identified within the set of peer-support facilitators. First I will discuss how students approach peers in a strategic way. Making friends is not about finding people who share a similar background or interests, there is one single similarity that brings them together, the fact that they are all under the same threat and they need help *to survive* the School. A second element identified is how students build social capital in School, and how the new social connections move from being with people *alike* to reaching out to others *I need.* Moving from bonding to bridging social capital is a strategy to improve their sources of support and strengthen their social networks. Eventually, some instrumental relations go through changes and become authentic friendship relationships where caring for others is the motivation to help each other stay, it means reciprocity.

Finally, I identify two types of learning communities, one promoted by a School scheme with random results depending on how participants interact in the groups, and another one, a closely knitted student-led community that emerges from the struggle generated by the educational model of the School. In these learning communities, similar to a wolf pack, the less-prepared students are nurtured by better-fit caring peers and eventually *lean to howl* and acquire the skills to internalise the School *doxa* and develop the *academic capital* needed to succeed. Students are able to overcome socioeconomic or cultural differences, and in being a part of a group they are supported and develop a sense of community, not only for learning, but for caring purposes.

6.1.1 'We are a family… not realising that makes us waste valuable time': strategic grouping to develop a sense of belonging

Evidence found in this study shows how students initially look for elements in common that would bring them together with their classmates during the transition stage in the first weeks of their first semester. Some students identify classmates from high-school, familiar faces, or people who share similar interests, a common ground. Those elements may guide the initial selection of peers to approach in a process of transition and initial steps towards integration into a new environment:

> *I like chess a lot and I still practice it, it is a passion of mine, so when I first came they were playing chess… He [student playing chess] introduced me to some of his friends who were in the last semester, some were in the students' association and he showed me there, so the relationship started. (Nicolás, T, Non-L)*

A critical function of friendship is the role of 'introducing individuals to other potential friends and expanding social networks' (Buote et al., 2007, p. 686). Student societies and sports activities are strategies used by higher education institutions to promote social integration, expand the student experience, and generate a sense of community. The School of Economics offers limited opportunities for students to participate in extra-curricular activities that would promote social integration or engagement with the community. Activities like chess, cards, and ping pong, with almost no female participation, are practiced by small groups of students, but not encouraged by the School, following the idea that they represent a distraction from academic responsibilities.

Thomas (2002) suggests higher education is a field where individuals negotiate their position, and in this process they require not only a learning environment but an environment where social relations can be developed. *Persisters* identify their closest friendships are those developed at School. The full-time nature of the course increases opportunities to share meaningful experiences with peers, and the social capital gained is an

element of influence on their permanence. An initial change experienced by *persisters* was giving a marginal role to their social life from outside the environment of the School, this new reality was accepted and internalised as a necessary change to be able to stay in School:

> *My friends were the people who were with me at School… my social life was there [at School], it had to be there, I had no way to go back home for lunch, I lived too far away. I would bring my lunch, everything happened there, I even had a deodorant at School to hold for the whole day. (Roberto, FG, L)*

Most *persisters* are successful in moving from the associations from outside School to the ones available in the new context. As Roberto made it clear, life had to be there, and being able to meet this requirement facilitated the transition to a course that demands high levels of engagement. But for other students making friends represented a more complex process that involved a higher level of emotional involvement. For Elisa, relationships have a strong meaning, her selectivity regarding personal interactions is based on the importance of honesty in friendship:

> *Many of them [classmates] knew each other, they lived here, they were neighbours, went to the same high-school, so when I started School that made me feel I didn't fit in. They gathered in small groups, knew each other, had nicknames, I was the odd one out…I was under the impression the so-called integration party was more a fuss than a real integrational activity, I was struggling more with doing well in School. (Elisa, FG, Non-L)*

For Elisa, initial interactions with classmates were not central to her student experience, as she recalls being more concerned about academic matters than social aspects of integrating into the community. Elisa experienced a mismatch between the values she considered important in friendship and her perceptions of what her classmates

had to offer. Coming from a background of high academic achievement, her decision to focus on academic matters and isolate herself from the social interactions generated a vulnerability that only later would become a risk to her permanence.

The few social integration activities organised by the School to welcome new students do not reach out to students like Elisa, who reports not feeling comfortable in a pool party with alcohol involved, or a party 'for women' where male students dress as women presumably in an attempt to make female students feel welcomed to a male dominated environment. Elisa chooses isolation over socialisation, and the institution takes no notice of the impact of those individual decisions. Elisa reports feeling lonely as she progressed in the course, she went through a mental health crisis on her own, and hiding her condition was easy as she had no close connections with others around her. Her experience not only affected her academic outcome, but it also put her wellbeing at risk:

> *I was going through a health problem and nobody knew anything, nobody said a*
> *thing about it. I started having moments when I couldn't go to school, I couldn't*
> *stand on my feet, I couldn't hold a pen… later my grandmother committed suicide,*
> *and there were a lot of things that knocked me down emotionally… I was not able to*
> *retain information not because I was a bad or irresponsible sstudent, but because I*
> *also had on my shoulders a heavy load, something really difficult. I was in despair*
> *and nobody noticed it. (Elisa, FG, Non-L)*

Elisa faced many disadvantages, being away from home and not having friends around her to provide support or comfort in circumstances that were beyond her. For such scenarios, it is assumed that institutions will consider the promotion of students' wellbeing as part of the commitment to support students in their university experience, and mental health is identified as a challenge students tend to hide from others due to the stigma that accompanies mental health issues (Quinn, Wilson, MacIntyre, & Tinklin, 2009).

The limited professional support available to students at the UANL is located 20 km.

away and over an hour commute on public transportation from the campus where the

School is located, this means the service is not truly accessible to all members of the student

community. Faculty members reported having no information on the options available and

the routes to access professional support services to deal with mental health issues.

Students are left on their own to procure their own resources to face setbacks, and

evidence suggests it is through social interactions at School that students find support and

guidance to approach challenges.

> *I had friends I got along with really well, four or five of them, and it was the only*
>
> *thing that rescued me… loneliness is a complicated thing, and even more in a course*
>
> *where support was needed, really needed, even having a classmate saying 'you will*
>
> *pass mate', hearing that was enough. (Roberto, FG-L)*

Friends as an instrument of *rescue* transmits the sense of urgency students'

experience, and the relevance of support to overcome not only academic difficulties, but

also issues of a more personal sphere. Roberto identifies himself as a very outgoing person,

reaching out to others was easy for him and still he felt rejected by others. Elisa, with a

more introvert and selective approach to friendship, does not have that source of support.

Her emotional struggle as the reason behind her poor academic performance is hidden from

the School community, which sees in her a student not able to cope with the academic

demands of the course.

Literature emphasises the importance of developing a sense of belonging, as it is

associated to emotional support from peers, and this support can help students when facing

problems (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). In choosing peers, students can base their

decision on issues of identity and personality, leading to closely knitted groups based on

looks, self-perception, pastimes, cognitive skills, use of language, the area where they live,

and other elements closely related to social class and *cultural capital*. Not sharing an evident

characteristic with peers represents an initial barrier to reach out to others, and this is particularly true for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds enrolled in an academically elitist School with a *habitus* that favours more privileged students. Roberto finds his place in a group of students not able to fit in any other group, and because this group embraces individuals with different characteristics and focuses on a purpose of unifying instead of differentiating, it becomes a strong source of support:

> *There were ghettos, you had the cools, the nacos[15], the sceptics, the nerds. The School leads us to that… I was rejected by the other groups, my group was very small, only 7, and we were called "The forgotten"…what surprised me is that in the last semesters, when there were fewer students, those initial groups disappeared and we became closer. The group with more survivors was the forgotten, we had fewer emotional conflicts. (Roberto, FG, L)*

The School represents for students an environment of competition fostered by high academic expectations, and what Roberto's group had to offer was a space where students did not experience the stress found in negotiating social conventions, less pressure to gain membership of the group, and more efforts set on a shared purpose: improve their academic performance and progress in the course. Ostrove and Long (2007) provide evidence on the importance of developing a sense of belonging in fostering achievement in higher education, in the sense that it affects individuals' engagement and involvement in the activities related to the institution. Roberto and Elisa illustrate two opposite approaches observed in the School, one acknowledges the need for others as a source of help and companionship, the other one choosing isolation, a pathway to a situation of risk of dropout.

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[15] A pejorative word often used in Mexico to describe bad-mannered, poorly educated people or those with bad taste.

The awareness of the importance of socioeconomic status and its implications in opportunities to socialise with *smart* students is clear to Natalia , who illustrates how students from lower socioeconomic strata experience social integration with additional challenges not experienced by students from a more privileged background:

> *To make friends in School, money was important. Those with money would mingle with the smart student of the class, they would make friends with them, and in return they would pass information, and the students with money would give them a ride, and well I was not an intellect celebrity, so it was hard. (Natalia, FG, Non-L)*

For Natalia, her low academic performance and her low socioeconomic background represent disadvantages to approach students who she identifies as strategic to help her improve her academic development. Natalia reports it was up to her to stay, with her own resources and her determination to complete the course. Later on when she found herself in a situation where a new student was looking for support and comfort, she shared with peers her attitude towards the situation.

> *She was expecting support, like 'don't worry, echale ganas, and this and that' I said 'if you can't make it, go somewhere you can outstand and don't waste your time', everyone said 'how you dare say that!', but that's what I have always believed… it was not about a lack of capacity, it's that they did not have the disposition to do it, the most important factor was effort. (Natalia, FG, Non-L)*

For Natalia, internal resources substituted the help she was not able to access from better prepared peers, and she focused on developing strategies of active learning that will be discussed in the following section of this chapter. In general, participants share the perception that the division amongst students is fostered by the academically-oriented environment. The characteristics of the School play a role in determining relationships among students, but no principles of collaboration or creation of a community are observed

in the initial formation of groups. For many students like Natalia it becomes an individual mission.

After the transition period of the first year, *persisters* faced the need to make new friends. In some cases, friends made at the start decide to leave the course, in other cases students identify the negative influence from friends, and decide they need a different type of friends to improve their chances to persist. Marco illustrates how the process of making friends this time is not a random exercise, it serves a very clear purpose, and it is important to take control over who to hang out with. The selection of friends becomes an instrument to improve academic performance and a source of encouragement to face setbacks:

> *I was on hold for a semester, le eché ganas (I worked hard) to come back and then I started to hang out with people who would help me improve, people who would study for the exams, people that could help me… my female friends would work hard, boys wouldn't, so I moved to the girls group to study with them. (Marco, FG, L)*

The initial friendship that was established based on elements students had in common with peers evolves, and strategic grouping emerges as a source of support. Marco identifies female students were a better influence for his academic purpose, and his experience goes in line with the previously discussed argument that women who choose fields of study perceived as male dominated identify themselves as having qualities above the level of requirement.

He makes reference to male friends with whom he shares his leisure time, but they are not be his choice of friendship to engage with academic activities. Understanding that friendship is a source of support is an element that sets students minds on looking for new friends that serve the goal of improving academic integration in general, and simultaneously help build a sense of belonging. Choosing friends becomes a strategy for permanence, and *persisters*' behaviours illustrate the internalisation of this need in order to stay afloat.

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This decision goes in hand with findings from research on student persistence, which state that student belonging is achieved through supportive peer relations (Thomas & May, 2011). The importance of feeling accepted is a key element in the permanence for students, regardless of their academic or social background, and Elisa offers a summary of the points that are often missing in the experience of being a student in a highly competitive context:

> *We need to be more human, to stop saying 'we're not the same or why do you always do badly?' to avoid judging students and lecturers, but learn to know each other, I think there is nothing wrong with that. I feel in the end we are a family, because we spend too much time together, and not realising that makes us waste valuable time. (Elisa, FG, Non-L)*

6.1.2 'Ask or die': from bonding to bridging social capital

Having good friends as a key element to persist is an example of social capital used to overcome social exclusion in academic elitism. It is through experience that students learn they can extend their friendship circles to groups of students from different cohorts, and the interaction with those students who have extra experience on the course proves to be a useful strategy to improve persistence. When academic failure occurs with high frequency, students tend to lag behind in their progression and students from different cohorts end up mixing, consequently students from lower semesters get to benefit from the experience of peers who have already been through the challenges of the modules:

> *I learned I could ask students in higher semesters for their notes and it was ok, but I didn't learn that until the fifth or sixth semester, at first I didn't know it was possible, you learn that by observing others doing it. When you work with students who are lagging behind, you get to see their study methods. (Natalia, FG, Non-L)*

Initially, students tend to group with students from the same cohort who are similar in some relevant form, like age, social class, prior education, shared pastimes etc. As discussed in Chapter one, this type of social capital, referred to as bonding social capital, is the main source of social support individuals have in society (Putnam, 2002). However, the social capital gained through relationships with those who are dissimilar in evident ways, bridging social capital, represents an opportunity to develop collaboration rather than isolation among members of a wider community. Bridging is a way to obtain from others what we do not have and we need, a key strategy to promote progression in the experiences of students in this study.

The ghettos identified by Roberto, discussed in the previous section, are examples of bonding social capital that represent no initial incentives to reach out to other groups, and the lack of collaboration between one and another perpetuates the possible weakness of each group, if any observed. Above all, this initial bonding behaviour reduces the opportunity to generate a sense of identity as members of a broader community, to make all students feel they belong. Yet, a transformation of social networks is identified and the dissimilarities that originally isolated them from other groups gradually become secondary to the similarities that emerge through the experiences of shared struggle, making it possible to bridge and with time to bond with others, generating a transformation in the type of social capital.

Building social capital is a process that takes time, as individuals require interaction to open up to bonding. Because social interactions in the School are not promoted, it takes time for students to initiate the process to engage in activities with others in a way that works for the advancement of their academic development, and not for the potential risk of diverting efforts from coursework, as it was observed among *leavers*. Engaging into study groups, and approaching others to meet course requirements is the strategy available to most students in order to build social capital that fosters permanence. Roberto illustrates

how the initial separations related to bonding strategies, which provided strong in-group loyalty, make way to bridging social capital, a way to reach out to others, slowly bringing down the separation originally observed.

> *In the last semesters, when there were fewer students, those groups disappeared and we became closer… there was no one left to approach with questions, it was down to ask or die before the exams. (Roberto, FG, L)*

Reaching out to others is more a reactive than a proactive way of building social capital. The academic elitism of the course means students are expected to work on their academic development in an intensive way, and they are expected to invest their time wisely on their academic progress (Campbell & Dortch, in press). Academics share this view, and in Chapter Eight I shall discuss how social and sport activities are discouraged because they are perceived as a distractor for students, an activity with no symbolic value and of low priority for the *habitus* of the School. An element not identify in those activities is the opportunity to develop social capital, so it is up to students' initiative to close this gap.

Despite the lack of social activities promoted by the School, students organise activities to help them find a moment of relaxation and socialisation in their busy schedule, and the long run value of social capital is identified as an area of opportunity the School needs to develop, as Nicolás identifies networking to be a fundamental element to progress in life, but the stigma the School *habitus* places on socialisation promotes a polarisation from isolation to spending too much time with friends. The balance that *persisters* find relies on having groups of friends who serve different purposes, and taking control over who they hang out with is a characteristic of the student who stays on the course.

> *The first three semesters it was constantly about skipping lessons, playing chess, go out for a smoke, and I would say yes let's do it. In my transition to becoming a better student, I didn't change my circle of friends and there were some complications, they*

would ask me if I was going to join them to play, I said I was not because I wanted to

stay in class, my friends tried to persuade me, sometimes they did persuade me, so

friendship does have an important effect. (David, FG, L)

David realised the influence of his friends, and even though he decided to stay close

to them, he was no longer vulnerable to their influence, as he was able to identify he could

not rely on his friends judgement if he wanted to reach his academic objectives.

Understanding the purpose of relationships with classmates is an important step towards

taking control over how to deal with academic elitism, and this is an element that changes

the direction of the student experience. Peers' influence can be detrimental for the

purposes of academic integration and academic success within a course with a discourse of

high academic rigour. Helping students realise the importance of this dynamic is not an easy

task; some participants report being advised to prioritise their time and activities right at the

start, but the interpretation of those words varies and so do the initial behaviours adopted.

6.1.3 'Hang around with wolves, and you will learn to howl': peer-teaching vs. peer-learning

Despite the risks of negative peer influence, the benefits of healthy social interactions

provide elements that help not only overcome difficulties related to the transition

experience of the first year, but throughout the progression of the course as a support

system to most students, without differentiation of prior academic background.

Black and MacKenzie (2008) discuss practices of peer-support observed in higher

education, and identify two perspectives in their study: explicit practices that aim directly at

supporting students, mostly targeted populations such as non-traditional students; and

implicit practices, which are considered as *normal activities* aimed at promoting social and

academic integration such as societies and student unions. It is suggested both types of

activities can be benefitial to students provided they help them improve their sense of

belonging within the institution and with clear activities aimed at directing students' efforts

towards the expected outcomes of the institution. Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999) identify peer-learning differentiates between peer-teaching practices and peer-learning practices, and in the context of the present study I find both practices to be observed, both with purpose of helping students improve their academic integration, but with differences in the social aspect.

Yorke and Longden suggest 'for some students, a sense of belonging will develop as a matter of course; for others this may not happen unless the institution makes an effort' (2004, p 137). The School´s effort to bring students together is a peer-teaching scheme with the explicit purpose of providing academic support to the whole group of students enrolled in a given module. Students, on the other hand, self-organise peer-learning practices which adapt to the needs of small groups in terms of content and timing, this is, small groups of students get together and help each other with the contents they find most challenging in the modules. *Persisters* report both practices contribute to their academic performance and consequently to their persistence in the course, but for peer-support to work I identify that it matters that others care to help students, and it matters that support comes when needed and not forced into students at a time when they are not ready to receive that help.

The peer-assisted learning scheme known as *laboratorios* (see Chapter Three, section 3.2) provides students with relevant practice to acquire the knowledge of relevance to the field, but the fact that they are aimed at the whole group means the disadvantaged position of less-prepared students is potentially perpetuated, they provide *equal treatment, not equity of opportunity*. For the better prepared students, it could represent a practice perceived as unnecessary if it does not contribute any additional elements to their learning, and the mandatory nature of the sessions turns the scheme into a burden for some.

Oscar's experience exemplifies how the difficulties to benefit from *laboratorios* are not exclusive to students identified as disadvantaged. Oscar graduated from the best feeder high-school of the UANL, and he went through the first three semesters of the

undergraduate course in economics without failing a single module, a rare achievement in this School. He identifies as being an introvert and when he first started the course he would stick to study habits that favoured working on his own:

> *I didn't feel confident to approach the laboratorista, I would probably look for them after the session. I didn't realise how important it was until I was a laboratorista myself. I realised it was necessary and I always tried to approach students asking if they were getting a clear idea, 'if you don't want to ask in front of others ask me in private, I have no problems with that.' (Oscar, T, L)*

Oscar illustrates how the distance students keep in those sessions is not necessarily a case of not having an interest, but a low level of confidence, or fear of exposing themselves in front of the group and *revealing* academic weaknesses in an environment where students are expected to show they are worthy members of an academically elitist School. Sandra, a first generation student who experienced *laboratorios* in a similar way to Oscar, shares her feeling in saying *you could not look like a fool because we all had to be genius.* Elisa also illustrates this feeling expressing a fear of being exposed.

> *I was too embarrassed to ask, I was afraid to ask, I thought they were going to realise I didn't know anything and they were going to wonder what I was doing there, so that oppressed me more. (Elisa, FG, Non-L)*

The opportunity to get academic support and guidance from a more experienced student is expected to be a way to engage students into academic progression, and making it a systematic part of the course means students have access to resources needed to consolidate what is learnt in the lectures within an environment that is expected to be friendlier and more personalised. However, diverse barriers emerge with entangled elements of low self-perception, personality, and a poor sense of belonging, together with differences in the preferred way to approach studying. This type of support shares the

features of *peer-teaching,* where 'there is a clear and consistent differentiation between the teaching and learning role, although all parties may be students' (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999, p. 414). Students are forced to engage within a learning community where they do not feel integrated, and if no efforts are made to make students feel part of this learning community, evidence shows the sessions may be experienced in a negative way.

Learning communities organised by the School have the advantage of providing students with a relatively more relaxed environment to discuss and solve doubts, compared to the formality of a lecturer-led session. Additionally, students do not need any social capital to have access to the support and guidance of a more experienced student, but having access to the sessions does not result in being able to integrate into the activities or make the best use of them. Assuming that the needs for academic support are being addressed through this scheme illustrates a limited understanding of what actually happens in those sessions and what needs to be done to transform them into real learning opportunities for all.

> *I never liked the laboratorios, I hated them and I always believed they took time*
>
> *from me. They were scheduled in a moment when I was probably not in the mood to*
>
> *study, working with people I didn't want to be with. (Natalia, FG, Non-L)*

Natalia illustrates how the sessions can become a burden to some students, who are required to work in a setting where they feel uncomfortable, forcing interactions among students without considering the relevance of building a sense of community or the relevance of timing. The idea of receiving academic support is perceived as positive, but the mandatory nature of the *laboratorios* which forces students to work with people they do not feel comfortable with, determines to a great extent how students experience this type of support and could end up turning this activity into a fruitless requirement.

It was uncomfortable, students went to their labs because it was a requirement, I

was there running the lab because it was a requirement for me, we were in the

classroom to meet requirements. (Oscar, T, L)

Even though seven out of ten *persisters* interviewed took the role of *laboratorista*

during their time at the School and acknowledge the importance of the sessions, particularly

during the transition into the School educational model, the same number of participants

reported finding the sessions useless in general, subject to the quality and *innate* teaching

abilities of the student-peer in charge, and admit they negotiated a way to avoid the

attendance element of the scheme, whenever possible, because they considered

laboratorios to be irrelevant for their academic development.

The difficulties in monitoring the engagement of the *laboratorista*s in preparing

sessions and getting students interested in the academic activities represent areas of

opportunity for the implementation of this scheme. Students report not all *laboratoristas*

were committed or good at doing the job, resulting in a missed opportunity for meaningful

academic support. Roberto took his personal experience in consideration when he took the

role of *laboratorista* and his commitment to provide students with the type of support he

wished he had received served as his motivation to make an effort in his role:

What I'm proud of is that many students approached me and said 'we are really

thankful, we learned a lot with you', some would say they had learnt more with me

than with the lecturer, I don't know if that's true, but I wanted to help them, I

prepared my lessons, I answered their doubts. (Roberto, FG, L)

Oscar and Roberto's experiences as *laboratoristas* show how attitudes of the student-

peer in charge can undermine or boost the benefits of the sessions. Because there is no

systematic procedure to assign or train student-peers in this scheme, it becomes a practice

with random results. For some *persisters* it was arguably a good idea, as the session became

a burden they had to overcome. The idea that *laboratorios* had to be strict and the importance given to earning credits over improving learning transforms the potential positive effects of this practice into yet another academic performativity exercise:

> *I was a laboratorista and on a meeting with professor [name] he said 'laboratorios have to be strict, keep track of attendance, don't give credits for nothing', so I think, if you're going to give me a seminar with the same level of demand as my class, best not to have it so that I don't have to worry about both, that's why I didn't like seminars too much, I preferred studying on my own. (Marco, FG, L)*

Making learning communities mandatory may be aimed at generating changes in study habits, but the fact that the success of the session depended to a great extent on the personality and attitude of the *laboratorista* is a weakness of this student-peer assisted practice.

In contrast to the School-promoted scheme, there is a different type of experience regarding learning communities in the form of self-organised groups, where students feel welcomed. A characteristic of this group is the willingness to nurture others. Braxton and Hirschy (2004) suggest the concept of *communal potential* which focuses on relationships between students and their peers, different from Tinto's concept of social integration, which considers interactions between the student and peers, faculty and staff. Communal potential is a concept of student perception of relationships that give individuals a sense of 'the possibility of an affinity group for them to join in the student community' (Braxton & Hirschy, 2004, p. 100). The importance of finding a meaning into the social relationships makes a difference between belonging into a peer-learning group in contrast to having access but no membership of a group, as it may be the way some students experience *laboratorios.*

Students' self-organised learning communities are characterised by spontaneity and caring, and in those interactions students acknowledge the importance of the help received

from peers in terms of shaping behaviours and attitudes that align with the demands of the School *doxa* within a place perceived as safe. These experiences improve students' sense of community, and represent a communal potential within academic elitism:

> *My first group of friends was a mess and a pain, they all left…I had failed all my modules in the first year, then I met a friend, she incorporated me to her small group, a bunch of nerds, like they say 'hang around with wolves, and you will learn to howl', with them I learned a lot, one of them became my best friend (Nicolás, T, Non-L)*

In the experience shared by Nicolás, two elements can be identified in the student-led learning communities that are not always present in the School-led learning communities. In these naturally formed study groups, students are invited to participate, and what initiates the interaction and promotes engagement is an element of caring and friendship among equal peers who are able to take both roles, the role of teaching and the role of learning. Boud, Cohen, and Sampson (1999) observe how peer-learning has this feature of recirpocity, not necessarily found in peer-teaching. The second elements is the flexibility offered by the student-led groups, since it does not follow rigorous schemes that impose times and rules to participate, it is a more spontaneous dynamic and the incentive to participate is the identified need of support, and not a requirement that needs to be fulfilled.

A definition of peer tutoring proposed by Topping (1996) suggests that peer tutoring leads to the acquisition of knowledge and skill through engagement in activities that support academic progress. It involves 'people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by teaching' (Topping, 1996, p. 322), a definition that emphasises the elements of equal status between students involved in the activity. Another insightful perspective comes from Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999), who highlight the importance of the element of reciprocal learning, where students in the group act as both teachers and learners. In peer-learning the need

tends to be mutual, and the interest of all those involved works in benefit of engagement in the activities.

Experiences from *persisters* suggest social integration in the form of a sense of membership of a group could play a defining role in the process of deciding to continue or to withdraw from the course, because it has a direct impact on how students integrate academically to the School. Peers who motivate each other and engage in natural ways, despite the limited social integration activities available to them, form valuable sources of support that promote the intention to stay.

6.2 Student-based facilitators

The positive effects of social interactions identified among *peristers* occur alongside elements of a more individual nature that make it possible to acquire knowledge and skills to foster permanence and completion. Bean and Eaton (2001) propose that for retention in higher education to be observed, student-based decisions are the ultimate element to affect the decision to either stay or leave. Those psychological theories criticise the leading models on dropout and retention, particularly Tinto's, for the limited attention paid to the processes that individuals have to go through to achieve social and academic integration.

The scope of my research is exploratory, and it does not intend to provide a detailed description of processes experienced by students, but it does identify that similar to what is suggested in the literature on retention, students who completed the course show individual characteristics and transformations that contribute to the intention to persist and the achievement of completion. I identify three student-based facilitators. The first one is related to the individual commitment to the goal of graduating as an economist, which illustrates how the determination that accompanies this commitment serves as a force that helps them be tenacious at School. Secondly, students adjust or develop their strategies and skills to take control over their learning and develop abilities that help make effective and

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efficient use of resources, including time. Students develop the initiative to implement

necessary changes not only in their learning skills, but in other elements of self-regulation,

self-efficacy, and how they prioritise activities and channel their efforts. Finally, *persisters*

are students who have or are able to develop the strength to overcome difficulties, they

show resilience in life that is not explicitly taught by the School but is found to be an

important element to stay the course.

6.2.1 'My dream was to be an economist': goal commitment

Literature on dropout and persistence state that goal and institutional commitment

are elements observed to have an influence on persistence. The commitment to the goal of

graduating tends to be measured in terms of intention to get a degree, and the commitment

to the institution is measured in terms of satisfaction, usually anticipated, with the

institution (Tinto, 1993). Out of ten *persisters* interviewed, two reported considering the

idea of not completing the course:

> *In every semester after the fifth semester I wanted to leave the school, I didn't want*
>
> *to be there, it was my tiredness, the timetable, so much information, always failing*
>
> *tests, under pressure, but coincidentally when the semester was over I felt as if none*
>
> *of that had happened, I would say 'one more semester, one more, I can do this', I*
>
> *wanted to graduate, I really wanted to be an economist. (Natalia, FG, Non-L)*

The discouragement generated from high levels of demand, extensive hours spent

studying and the poor results obtained were a combination of elements identified to doubt

permanence in the course. This is an experience identified among students who left the

course, but in the case of *persisters*, internalising the responsibility of failure is a difference

oberved. Natalia feels able to meet academic expectations,exhaustion is a barrier, but once

the stress of the semester was over she was able to connect again with her intentions to

become an economist. Different from Natalia's academic struggle, Ana reports a situation in which the idea to leave the course was influenced by the high dropout rate observed among classmates and the lack of a clear career development plan upon graduation:

> *I was doing fine, and then in the fourth or fifth semester, half of my classmates had left and I was not that sure. I thought 'what about transferring to another course?' I wondered where I was going to fit out there in the world. (Ana, T, L)*

Ana completed the course within the times set by the programme, and as the student with the highest GPA in her class she received the academic merit award granted each year by the UANL to the top students in each undergraduate course. She was an outstanding student, but her academic success did not spare her from experiencing doubts based on what she observed was happening around her. The high dropout rates among her classmates generated doubts on her own intention to stay, and not having a clear connection between what she was learning and the potential jobs she could take upon graduation made her consider the idea of leaving. Expectations for career development is a category of expectations for university identified in the literature to affect commitment to the goal of completing a university degree (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995), and Ana shows how even for students who do not experience academic struggle and do not report doubts on their vocation, a poor clarity on career options generates doubts in their determination to complete the course.

For most students, graduating as an economist was a firm goal and their commitment to graduating from this School was expressed as well. For students like Elisa, it was a dream that would help her achieve the professional future she had envisioned.

> *My dream was to be an economist. I think everything started long ago, and it will sound stupid, but there was a soap opera about economists, a Colombian soap opera, and from there I would see how they talked and how they administered a*

business. My parents had a small business and I visualised myself like that, I wanted

to be successful, to work doing the things I was seeing, and the road to get there

was through my studies, studying economics and doing my best. (Elisa, FG, Non-L)

Being the first person in her family to go to university, she had limited references of what university was about, although she identified herself as a competitive and goal oriented student with high educational aspirations. She had formed an expectation on what it meant to be an economist through a reference from popular culture. Her father comes from a disadvantaged background and he managed to set and successfully run his own business, coming from a background of hard work and achievement despite adversities was a source of determination to persevere for Elisa.

For other students like Roberto, the commitment to the goal of graduating as an economist served a social purpose. He identifies it as a dream too, and her personal success is based on the idea of generating social changes focused on elements of wealth distribution and fighting poverty. He could relate his ideal with the reality that surrounded him, and the first-hand contact with poverty and economic inequality gave his dream a sense of importance. The confidence he had on being able to achieve his goal of generating a change in society through this degree fed his commitment to persist:

I was interested in trying to change that [poverty], because as I was of humble

origins, it is the dream of all humble people, I believe, to try to make a change.

(Roberto, FG, L)

For *persisters*, their commitment to become an economist obeys reasons of different origins. For some it is the reassurance from their academic success in the course telling them they are in the right place, for others the determination comes from the idea of personal socioeconomic mobility and access to roles perceived as successful in society, and there are those who set as their goal the contribution to improvements in the

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socioeconomic structures of a nation. For all these *persisters*, the weight of difficulties of the course does not detract them from their determination to become economists, and the expectations of a professional future that will be fulfilled through the achievement of getting this degree represents a motivation to their permanence.

6.2.2 'I became a nerd': self-efficacy and self-regulation.

Persisters experienced the shock of a different educational model, and the need to change their approach to learning, similar to what was identified among students who left the course. Both traditional and first-generation students report coming to university with a self-perception of achievement, built in different ways. Some students report elements of self-efficacy, and identify having the capacity to meet academic expectations based on high levels of effort. Conversely, there are students who identify being good at school, with no association with an element of effort:

> *I was a model student. I knew there was something to be done, it was not that I liked*
>
> *all the modules, but the sense of responsibility was stronger and I set myself to do*
>
> *them all. (Ana, T, L)*

and:

> *I was not a good student in high-school, but I did pass all my modules and I was good*
>
> *at the tough modules, like maths. (Marco, FG, L)*

Interestingly, the differences tend to show an association with gender, with female students making reference to their perceived levels of effort dedicated to their education, and male students reporting the perceived low effort required for academic accomplishment or confidence in modules traditionally considered hard or challenging, such as maths. Male participants in this study briefly admit they wish they had been more responsible from the start of the course. This difference is found in literature on perception

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of achievement in mathematics, which suggests that `girls were felt to lack something, even if they were successful', while it seemed that `boys were felt to possess the very thing that girls were taken to lack' (Walkerdine, 1998, p. 19). This issue requires further research in the context of this study, yet this observation can serve as an initial reference to explore a gender issue related to pathways to achievement.

Students realise the change of context is not only an educational model that sets different demands, it is also an environment that transfers to the individual the responsibility to succeed. Daily extensive readings, long hours at school, complex materials to study, and the challenge of *learning to think as an economist* are reported by *persisters* to be part of the academic activities they have to be capable of doing to achieve their goal. Ana, who identifies as a responsible student, is able to internalise at a very early stage what is expected from her in this new educational context:

> *I realised what I was being asked was not complicated, I had to read the book, I was being asked what the book says, and the first answer I thought was the correct answer was wrong, I had to remember what I had read. (Ana, T, L)*

Ana seems to find a process in what is required from her in order to meet the expectations of a module, and the way in which she simplifies the process illustrates her ability to internalise the expectations of the course. Zimmerman states 'self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather it is the self-directed process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills (2002, p. 65). Students like Ana, who have the foundations of learning based on effort, identify how being able to transfer intention into action facilitates the achievement of a goal. However, not all students have the capacity to identify this process. For student like Nicolás, who reported prior academic experiences to be characterised by low levels of effort required, the realisation of the importance of effort and control over learning did not always come soon enough to prevent negative outcomes:

We would come in the morning and instead of going to class we would play chess,

nobody said anything, ever. We imagined the consequences, but it was a bad habit,

once I started playing I would get lost in the game.(Nicolás, T, Non-L)

Nicolás makes reference to his first semester in School, and a lack of self-regulation can be identified in terms of the observation he makes on having no one there to stop him from doing something that he acknowledged as detrimental for his academic progression. His inability to regulate his behaviour results in a series of poor decisions with negative consequences for his studies, including taking a part-time job to save money to buy a car. Consequently, he struggled in the first semester and failed the three core modules of the semester. He reports this situation represented a wakeup call that triggered initial changes in his study strategies. The change was a reaction to the negative consequences experienced, and the decision to *quit my job and kill myself studying* was an intensive and temporary attitude towards studying that helped him catch up and pass the failed modules.

Students' adaptation process identifies the importance of redirecting their efforts and modify strategies, but in their discourse there is no reference to the idea of not being capable of completing the task. Hence, academic failure is associated to the lack of effort or preparation to meet the challenge and not to a lack of talent:

I started to fail and I was suspended in my fifth semester…that's when the penny

dropped, I realised I had to 'echarle ganas', so I started to study and I got better

grades... I would make neat notes of the lessons, with an index, if the lecturer didn't

elaborate on something, I would look for that information in the book and I would

add it to my notes, I changed my study habits… I became a nerd. (Marco, FG, L)

Students' capacity to adapt to the School is connected to their perception of capability to do what it takes to meet the expectations of the course. The changes reported by Marco are based on the integration of effective learning strategies and transforming

intentions into actions. Success was perceived as something within his capacities, so the discourse of effort and merit is internalised as a way to achieve progression and ultimately persistence in the course.

Cassidy (2011), suggests that with changes in the student population derived from widening participation policies, the non-traditional student population represents a challenge to institutions, since not all individuals within this group are equally equipped with predisposition to self-regulate. This scenario calls for pedagogic practices that help improve aspects of self-regulation. However, a perception of capability is not enough to overcome the challenges of the course. In the following section I will discuss how *persisters* experience the development of resilience in the face of adversities.

6.2.3 'A good student is not defined by the School': endure, adapt and recover (being a resilient student)

Persisters report that despite making changes in their learning practices, there are difficulties to be overcome that felt beyond their control. For *persisters*, it is not enough to feel they are able to meet the requirement, put a high value to learning, plan and manage their time effectively and observe persistence in the task, there is an additional element that escapes their capacities and consequently impact their motivation to continue:

> *The level of demand was really high and sometimes you would feel depressed after studying for 5 or 6 hours every day and then fail… for some reason you would have a question in the exam that was never discussed in the module or it was presented in a very simple way in class, but it was presented in a complex way in the exam, and that was frustrating, you had to prepare much more. (Roberto, FG, L)*

In academic elitism, pedagogic practices tend to work under the assumption that students are able to acquire knowledge or skills in an independent way. Disadvantaged

students are expected to compensate for assessment practices that are not aligned with their academic development, and the way Roberto initially internalised academic failure illustrates how the issue is to be addressed by the student usually explained in terms of insufficient levels of effort put to the task.

Having to face situations of adversity such as the one discussed above represents for *persisters* a loss in terms of motivation and confidence in being able to meet the expectations of the course, together with emotional distress that accompanies a sense of uncertainty. Elisa reports fearing exams and lecturers to a point that limits her capacity to focus on finding a way to transfer her efforts into progression, and the isolation that she experienced in School represents an additional adversity. Her hard work and dedication were not enough to overcome the challenges of an academically elite, a situation worsened by emotional distress and without guidance or support either at School or at home:

> *I did everything right, but here it was all wrong, nothing worked for me right from the start. I think it was a level of stress that I couldn't handle. I was scared of lecturers and exams, and I had to get over it, if I didn't that was not going to let me progress... I thought 'if I go back my parents will lock me down', too many things came to my mind. (Elisa, FG, Non-L)*

Elisa reports feeling uncomfortable in class due to the shame generated by academic failure. Throughout her interview, she emphasised her commitment to the goal of graduating was always there, and her efforts to progress in her learning were constant, but the discouragement of not obtaining positive results despite her commitment and effort, and the lack of guidance to redirect her efforts represented a form of adversity that went beyond her. It was until she was able to open up and look out for help that she was able to develop the capacity to manage her emotions, recover her strength and continue her progression in the course.

I realised that maybe the person sitting next to me did not understand either, and it was not the end of the world... a good student is not defined by the School, but by the effort and the willingness to learn. (Elisa, FG, Non-L)

Elisa's personal journey took her to a situation where she learnt the importance of support and caring relationships, and the importance of guidance when facing adversity. The difficulties she experienced in the academic realm added to an emotional situation at home, and mental health concerns. These setbacks in life represented situations Elisa perceived as out of her control and threatening to the achievement of her goal.

In literature, academic resilience is defined as the capacity to overcome chronic or acute academic adversity, such as repeating a grade, failing a subject, school suspension, school expulsion, to mention a few (Martin, 2013). Resilient students are those who sustain their motivation for achievement and performance in spite of stressful events that pose the risk of poor academic performance and even the risk of dropping out (Alva, 1991). Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) suggest that in environments of academic elite, successful students who experience an out of place situation have 'almost superhuman levels of motivation, resilience and determination…and acquire the self-confidence and self-regulation that accompanies academic success against the odds' (2009, p. 1115).

The School sets an environment of high stress for students, however, the absence of dedicated support provided by the School and the inaccessibility of the limited support offered by the university, as discussed in the previous section, leave students on their own to develop resilience. Evidence presented calls for attention and action to be taken in identifying academic risks in teaching, learning and assessing practices in School and to support and guide the development of individual attributes that may assist students in facing adversities that require more than self-efficacy.

6.3 Internalisation of School habitus

Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) suggest students from less-privileged backgrounds who face a *fish out of water* experience in elite higher education institutions and succeed in their goal are individuals able to fit as learners despite social class differences. Being part of a mass higher education system, the School of Economics attracts a student population with limited economic resources that would not be able to afford a private university education, and at the same time, the academic reputation of the School attracts students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who see it as an option of high quality education. The heterogeneity of the student population brings a challenge to an educational context that advocates homogeneity. Moreover, the intensity of academic work demanded in this school represents a challenge for both the traditional and the first-generation student, and the requirement of a full-time enrolment favours the conditions of privileged students who have the resources to be fully dedicated to their studies and have less barriers to meet the *doxa* of the School regarding time dedicated to their studies.

Literature on student retention that approaches this phenomenon considering institutional factors identify elements such as student satisfaction, selectivity, student-faculty interaction, peers and faculty attitudes and behaviours (institutional climate) and style of teaching and learning (Bean, 1980; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Pascarella, 1985; Thomas, 2002) as institutional elements that influence the decision to dropout or persist. However, the experience of *persisters* tends to be one of succeeding despite the School and not because of the elements found in it. There are three elements in this set of facilitators that will be discussed in this section. First, students' internalisation of lecturers' expectations, and what it implies in terms of expectations for support and interaction. Secondly, the assessment practices and the strategies adopted to approach exams to pass, not as an instrument to inform their learning. Finally, the adoption of the identity of being an economist as part of their discourse that has internalised the *habitus* of the School.

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6.3.1 'They are not actually interested in having all students staying': perception of lecturers' expectations

In the context of the School of Economics, lecturers are respected figures, with academic credentials that give them a position of dominance and power. This position of authority affects the relationship with students, who report fearing lecturers and consequently observe distancing practices. In the words of participants, *lecturers are well prepared, some are self-important but that is normal*, and in normalising this attitude, students grant lecturers permission to exercise *symbolic violence* in their pedagogic practices, as Elisa illustrates:

> *I was afraid of the lecturer, I don't know why. The teaching methodology was difficult for me, as a person I think [name of lecturer] must be really nice, but as a lecturer [name] caused me a conflict, [name] would start talking and talking and the class went on and time was up and then the lecturer would say 'it's really easy, 30 slides, check them and I´ll see you tomorrow' and that was it. (Elisa, FG, Non-L)*

The practice of not covering the agreed content of a lesson and passing students the responsibility to understand the contents with a subtle *it's really easy* represents a silent but aggressive practice. The signal sent is that not being able to understand the contents with ease would clashing with the teachers' perception of students' capacity to internalise the knowledge of relevance to the field. This is an invisible practice participants report they rarely discuss this with the School authority, because lecturers have a prestigious reputation that sustains the normalisation of detrimental academic practices.

Respect combined with fear is a form of experiencing authority, and in the limited interaction with faculty reported by participants, there are frequent elements of *symbolic violence* that silently trigger processes for and against student progression. David recalls a casual conversation with a lecturer while discussing his academic progress. The interaction

may seem trivial, but for David it caused a deep impact which he later on channelled for his own benefit:

> *I considered leaving, based on my marks and on the fact that I was making an effort and the results were not positive. [Name of lecturer] told me I was an average student, that hurt my pride, and after that I was not an average student anymore. (David, T,L)*

The impact of the comment made by that lecturer can be understood from that power and authority embedded in the position as an academic, and it is accepted by students. In calling him 'an average student', the lecturer verbalised an exercise of judgement of David using criteria the lecturer assigns to the student. This could have been a neutral judgement, but the way those words were internalised by David represented a challenge, it was uncomfortable for him being labelled as average, and that triggered changes in his dedication to studies. Different from the experience of *leavers*, who passively accepted lecturers' judgements as imminent truths, David's approach was proactive. In the interview he states the lecturer had *gotten it right*, and once he adjusted his effort and strategies at school, his academic outcomes improved.

The discourse that makes students responsible for their own progression and the central role played by self-efficacy is aligned with a heavily individualised *habitus*. A revealing finding was the perception of lecturers' expectations, based on the experience of graduates, to not prioritise student retention but to see dropout as a process of student self-selection under the dynamics of the School.

> *They are not actually interested in having all students staying, those who want to stay have to find their own means to stay. For the tutorial programme to work, it takes the premise that lecturers want students to stay in School. (Natalia, FG, Non-L)*

The experience of students who do not share the dominant culture of the School resemble the case of being a guest in someone's home, you may feel comfortable, but this is not your home. Contrary to the recommendations found in literature on faculty-student relationships, which report the importance of affective and supportive relationships to promote improvements on the quality of teaching and learning (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014), the practices in this School inform students that permanence is of relevance to them, and conditioned to their own effort, capability and resourcefulness.

The role of the lecturer is bounded to the classroom, with a discourse of open-doors to support students, and an institutional tutorial programme that claims to serve as a mechanism of guidance and advice through lecturer-student interaction. However, what Natalia illustrates is a hidden *doxa* of carelessness that sustains the idea that caring and support is associated with emotional work, an element that is dismissed in the world of academic elitism, which prioritises the development of a career based on elements of performativity measurements (Lynch, 2010), and provided that caring is not an element of value for career development in this context, the incentives to care for students' retention are lacking.

6.3.2 'No study method, but a method to pass exams': strategic approach to exams

Students identify time is a limited resource, and given the heavy workload of the curriculum, they learn to prioritise the use of time and how to approach different academic tasks. Students also understand the value of learning, but prioritise the value of marks. *Persisters* report learning does not always reflect positive marks in exams, and this calls for strategies that focus on getting the marks needed to complete the course. In other words, students identify that learning is wat they want, but passing exams is what they need.

> *I got it quickly, in my first exam I got 30, then I noticed 'he wants this' and I took*
>
> *notes, he wants this and that, and I think that's something many students fail to do,*

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> *they don't take notes on what the lecturers expect. That information came after the*
>
> *exam, in the session when the exam was discussed. (Nicolás, T, Non-L)*

Getting feedback after an assessment is not a systematic practice in School. Nicolás makes reference to one of those lecturers who opts to discuss the answers in class and models what was expected from students. The strategy of using feedback to improve the probability of getting a passing mark is a common practice students develop with time. Formative assessments are not part of the standardised practices in this School, and participants report that the questions in exams assess the ability to put into practice what was learnt, and participants identify that in order to answer those exams they had to *decipher what the lecturer was thinking*, a situation that illustrates that it is not enough to acquire the content knowledge of the course, but to internalise a way of thinking. Because the School gives lecturers total control over assessment, poor practices are not identified nor approached:

> *They were not unanswerable, but for a two hour exam you would have to meditate*
>
> *for 30 minutes, then 30 to figure out how to answer it, and in the last hour you*
>
> *would actually answer the test, so those were exams that require more time.*
> *(Marco, FG, L)*

When students become familiar with the characteristics of assessment practices htye report focusing efforts on developing a strategy to pass exams. *Persisters* suggest learning did not transfer into positive academic outcomes, and the argument of time constraints and the amount of materials they are expected to learn per module required them to implement a different strategy. The purpose of exams is then perceived as an instrument of selection of those able to develop strategies to overcome the test, and not an instrument to enhance learning.

6.4 Home-based facilitators

Different from countries where going to university is the moment in life when students leave home and start their journey towards an independent life, students in Mexico tend to stay local and leave home if the course of their choice is not offered by the local university and parents can afford to send them out of town. Living at home means in some scenarios getting involved with household chores and family responsibilities that take valuable study time, and if relationships at home are a source of stress and anxiety, being at home represents an additional adversity for students.

A general consensus among *persisters* is that family did not interfere with their studies, quite contrary they were always understanding and caring, and represented the ultimate source of support, inspiration and encouragement to persist. Families were important factors in promoting continuation in terms of the financial support offered to students, and in the engagement developed in students in the form of accountability to their parents in response to the support received and the expectations of success put on their student experience.

6.4.1 'You don't need to work, dedicate your time to study': financial support

The stories of struggle and poverty faced by parents are used as encouragement for their children to improve their opportunities in life, and this phenomenon is also observed among students from low-socioeconomic background at the School of Economics.

Natalia and Roberto illustrate the influence of struggle and their aspirations to improve their future, as both openly report coming from an environment where poverty surrounds them and they feel the urge to do something to change future opportunities for them and their home situation. Both come from a background of low *cultural capital* and the disadvantage of not finding at home a reference to what they were about to experience

at university. Nevertheless, parents encouraged them in their decision to enrol in a course of academic elitism:

> *It was a challenge for my dad too, he said 'are you sure?, because my boss told me his son couldn't make it in that course and he says you must be really good to make it then, aren't you feeling under pressure? Are you sure you're ok?' (Roberto, FG, L)*

Parents with no prior experience in higher education cannot provide guidance to their children regarding expectations on academic demands or how university works, and this gap is observed in the form of doubts and fears of parents. Roberto's father doubts were based on the fact that someone from a higher socioeconomic background was not able to succeed in this particular course. The concern about the risk of his son not being able to fit in and succeed represented an extended challenge for Roberto, and in his interview he expressed how this reference worked as a motivation to strive.

A situation that goes beyond the power of a School or an educational institution is the obstacle posed by socioeconomic conditions on aspirations to higher education in a country with nearly 50% of its population living in poverty. For a student who lacks economic resources and needs to make a living or contribute to the household income, the possibility to be dedicated full-time to education cannot be taken for granted. While money does not grant positive academic outcomes, it can be translated into availability of time, a fundamental resource for a course of academic elitism.

For Natalia, the opportunity to go to university was a source of great satisfaction in terms of the pride she generated in her family, but given her financial situation, her mother was not able to afford her education. Natalia involved her extended family, and she was able to get the financial resources needed to pay for her tuition fees.

My uncle supported me with money, he knew what economics was about, he was

very excited…when my mother mentioned it to friends at church, our strongest social

circle, she said 'yes, she's studying that,' she was very proud. (Natalia, FG, L)

The response of Natalia's extended family illustrates the value family places on education, and in the absence of *cultural capital* in the form of parents' educational qualifications or the shared culture of the dominant groups, the efforts and investment of their limited resources on education illustrate the priority education has for less privileged families, who support students with the resources needed to make full-time enrolment in academic elitism a possibility.

For Roberto and Natalia, their limited financial situation did not reach levels of risk to leave the course, and the provision for what they needed was enough for them to dedicate all their effort to study. In a context where no student loans are available and public grants for living expenses are limited and not sufficient, this home advantage can make a great difference for students in academic elitism regarding the quantity and quality of time dedicated to study, an element that directly affects academic performance.

6.4.2 'There was no way I could disappoint her': accountability to parents

For all participants in this study, parents or a member of the family represent the main source of financial support to go to university. Despite having access to different types of grants, it is always necessary to turn to parents to cover for the basic living expenses such as food and transportation, and accommodation, in the case of non-local students. This financial dependency makes students accountable for the support received and the opportunity to have the time to be completely dedicated to their studies. This sense of debt with parents generates a motivation to make an effort and succeed in their studies.

My mother is the kind of mother who would take the food from her plate to give it to you, she is amazing, she was my engine… she supported me all the time and by all means so that I could progress in life, there was no way I could disappoint her, that's why I had that spectacular impulse to stay on the course. (Roberto, FG, L)

Parents of first-generation students tend not to get involved with their children's education. This lack of involvement may be a response to their limited knowledge on how higher education works, but there is a form of involvement that is equally important. At home, parents show interest in their children's academic progression and one way to show the value they put on their children's education is the efforts made to provide with the economic resources required to stay in education on a full-time scheme. An expectation has been established and the commitment to fulfil that expectation functions as an element of pressure towards better academic performance and the goal of completion.

Personal commitment to parents serves as an impulse to change behaviours at school that derive in better academic results. It is also the positive reaffirmation of the benefits of getting a degree, obtained from a trustworthy source, what makes this accountability a powerful reason to strive in the course.The level of commitment a student shows towards family is a personal element that is likely to connect with concepts of value and moral, and it is difficult to replicate as a strategy for completion. Yet, what is important to observe is how family plays an important role in motivating students to overcome difficulties and in wanting to complete their academic objective. Different from what *leavers* reported, parents of *persisters* have an active and positive presence in their experience as students, and involving them through strategic activities, such as information sessions, or open days, could help spread the value of their influence on students' transition, integration and completion.

Summary

In this chapter I presented a discussion of four sets of facilitators identified to have supported students in their intentions to stay and complete the course. In the transition to a new environment, students find in peers an opportunity to feel welcomed and build the foundations of belonging despite the lack of social integration activities in School. Making friends is not an easy task and this poses risks to students' permanence.

Support to build membership of the School is not enough to get ahead in academic progression, *persisters* identify the need to extend their social relations beyond friends and expand the potential support to meet performativity requirements, particularly exams. A sense of belonging is developed through academic activities and not through social activities, as it is suggested by literature. Peer-teaching and peer-learning communities emerge, and in the dynamics observed in both types of collaboration schemes I find caring and wanting to help others to be more valuable than knowing the subject matter. This consideration is fundamental for the School's mandatory peer-teaching scheme to work.

A clear commitment to graduate from this particular course is the cohesive force of all individual efforts, and self-efficacy is the strategy to approach challenges perceived to be within students' capability, yet in order to overcome adversity, *persisters* face the need to develop academic resilience to face the extreme difficulties that require more than hard work. Students internalise the idea that in order to complete the course you have to have or develop what it takes, it is an individual quest and lecturers do not prioritise retention as a School policy. The ultimate barrier shared by all students is exams, and despite the value that learning has for students, performativity over learning becomes a way of approaching assessment to complete the course. A summary of the facilitators to persistence is presented in Table 6.3

In contrast to what is found in the literature on retention interventions in higher education, students' attainment in the context of the present study is characterised by the

determination of students against School practices, and a sense of belonging is achieved through students' shared threat of academic failure. Peer-support becomes a central element to foster permanence, and failing to develop social capital at early stages of the course represents a high risk to completion, yet the promotion of peer-support through School schemes has random results that require a revision to the scheme and the allocation of participants for the programme to work.

Table 6.3 How persisters experience facilitators

FACILITATORS	HOW IT IS EXPERIENCED BY STUDENTS
Peer-support	Making friends means for students the possibility to have a safe environment to adjust to the new context. The School's mandatory peer-teaching scheme offers access to all students, but its effectiveness depends on the people involved. Caring and interest in helping others matters over having great knowledge on the subject. Reciprocity in peer-learning generates engagement in both social and academic aspects of student life.
Student-based facilitators	Clarity in commitment to graduate gives students the determination to overcome barriers. Self-efficacy and capability are identified as vital strategies to promote and sustain changes to meet academic demand. Adversity and events perceived out of students' control calls for development of resilience. Peers and family become the main source of support in this regard.
Internalisation of School *habitus*	Students perceive their permanence and attainment is to be achieved despite the School: lectures' priority is not to help them attain, they are there to challenge them to strive. Learning is a valuable goal, but passing exams is what they need to focus on. Strategic approach to assessment becomes a way of navigating the course.
Home-based facilitators	Lack of *cultural capital* is compensated by the value parents give to education, it is expressed in terms of economic support, and despite having limited financial resources, parents offer full financial support, this gives students the time needed to be focused on their studies and generates accountability to parents, which serves as an additional motivation.

Source: Elaborated by author

7. Using Your Nails to Fight and Pass: How Membership of Academic Elitism is Achieved.

This chapter presents an analysis of the experiences of *students in progression*, which illustrate the dynamic nature of the integration process and how barriers are handled by students currently enrolled in the course. Literature on dropout and persistence makes great emphasis on the first year experience, as it is the stage dominantly considered to encompass the changes needed to incorporate successfully to university life. However, one of the outcomes of my research suggests the transition to academic elitism is more dramatic and extended for students than it is perceived by institutions. The process to integrate into academic elitism goes beyond the first year, and participants illustrate different barriers are faced in different stages, resulting in the need to reassess strategies to persist at different points of progression and constantly renegotiating their membership of an academic community with a discourse of high academic rigour and academic elitism.

Literature on the transition to higher education focuses heavily on institutional actions to create conditions that facilitate the transition (Terenzini, et al., 1994), and the role of faculty and student support services to encourage students' integration, both social and academic, to promote students' success and real opportunities for students (Tinto, 2008). Thomas and Quinn discuss that for many first generation students, leaving represents a process to identify what they want in life, but it is culturally understood as "a predictable symptom of working class propensity to failure" (2007, p. 56). In a parallel way, students who leave the course in the context of this study are perceived as not ready for the standards of the school, consequence of a gap between the academic preparation received and the requirements of academic elitism. The institution distances from the decision under the argument of high academic standards observed that have worked for generation in the

preparation of highly qualified professionals, hence the burden to close the gap is on students' shoulders.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how first generation students in particular find it challenging to cope with the School *habitus*, the negative impact of peer influence, and how family influence can work in detriment of persistence. *Students in progression* report similar barriers and the idea of leaving the course is not limited to non-traditional students, but also more prepared students experience doubt after encountering high levels of academic failure. In Chapter 6, I discussed how social capital represents a valuable element developed in School to work towards persistence, and how parents' lack of experience in higher education is compensated by means of encouragement, and the support required to be dedicated full-time to their studies, mostly in terms of time availability. Students who persist emphasise their commitment to their goal and the emotional support received from peers and family to overcome difficulties derived from the academic rigour of the course. The experiences of *leavers* and *persisters* are observed among *students in progression* as well, and all participants in this study illustrate how a prior experience of high achievement could work in detriment for students in this context. Overconfidence is not necessarily a useful characteristic, neither is the concept of parents' prior experience in higher education, because parents who did not have experience with academic elitism were not able to provide relevant guidance to their children, and because prior academic success cannot be replicated in this context of study following the same known strategies.

As a researcher, I decided to explore the experience of *students in progression* based on the awareness of bias that *leavers* and *persisters* could bring to the results. I found no relevant differences in the barriers and facilitators to persistence experienced by *students in progression* compared to those identified among *leavers* and *persisters*. However, the narrative of *students in progression* provides an additional element to help researchers understand what is behind the decision to stay or to leave the course.

An element that *students in progression* offer to the present study is the opportunity to explore how students build up earning their membership of academic elitism, the strategies used to internalise a new *habitus*, how they progressively overcome elements of *symbolic violence*, and eventually earn their place in academic elitism. The results emphasise how achieving membership is a process observed throughout the course, not bounded to the first year, accompanied by the recovery of a sense of worthiness lost after facing academic failure. It is also noted how the transformation students go through in order to overcome academic failure and stay in academic elitism are obscure for students themselves, making it an area of opportunity for further research to identify in a clear way what works for students to trigger changes in their behaviours in academic elitism.

The findings discussed are based on data obtained through interviews conducted in the fall-semester 2015 with 23 *students in progression*[16] (see Table 7.1). To the time of completion of this thesis, all students from the cohorts 2014 and 2013 had persisted, some lagging behind. In December 2016, participants from the 2008 to 2010 cohorts successfully completed the course and graduated.

Table 7.1 Students in progression grouped by type and year of enrolment

	First generation	Traditional
Local	Nelly 2014 Eduardo 2014 Vicente 2012** Anna 2012** Nuria 2012 Nina 2012 Olivia 2011	Saul 2014 Norma 2014 Cristobal 2013 Delia 2013 Sergio 2010* Luis 2009 Tomas 2008
Non-Local	Bernardo 2013 Lore 2012 Fernando 2010	Rafael 2014 Cesar 2014 Carlos 2012 Carolina 2010 Tania 2010 Claudio 2009

Source: Elaborated by author with information from the interviews

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[16] * Sergio left and transferred to another course after failing a module in the fifth opportunity in June 2017.
**Vicente and Anna, who lagged behind, were still in progression in September 2017.

The order in which I present the process is based on how participants' reported their experience. The first year is the initial transition into academic elitism, characterised by the need to confirm their course choice and become aware of normative incongruences that require students to redefine meaning of concepts such as *hard work.* In the second year, students consolidate small groups as safe nests where they undergo transformational processes assisted by peers, who become a microenvironment needed to *survive* the displacement between the high expectations known to student as a norm, to new expectations of academic adversity that comprise the School *habitus*. To overcome the third year, students have to take self-care actions to counteract the burnout derived from years of making a great effort to fit in the course and not seeing satisfactory results. Family and friends from outside school are a valuable asset in the efforts to overcome mental health issues derived from the high level of engagement and poor academic results. The practices of *symbolic violence* are dominated by a culture of *natural talent* and *meritocracy, which* perpetuates the marginalisation of students who are not *natural* to the context of academic elitism and who are not prompt in developing merits to stay. Membership is not granted upon admission, it has to be earned.

The end of the fourth year represents the consolidation of a transformation process and a full integration into the School community. *Symbolic violence* still characterises academic practices, but they have been internalised. Students identify the result of the process and see themselves close to *becoming an economist,* which is when they finally feel their membership has been earned. The process of gaining membership despite the barriers embedded in the School system are summarised in Olivia's words:

> *When you make progress in the course it is actually you, lecturers do have an*
> *influence, but it is actually you, making an effort, using your nails to fight and pass*
> *the modules. (Olivia, FG, L, 2011)*

7.1 First year experience.

The first year represents for students a defining stage in their personal and academic development. The demands of transition to university, and particularly to academic elitism, go beyond students' expectations. Persistence requires a commitment to the course and a maintained motivation to sustain efforts to overcome the violent process of displacement experienced by students, who see their self-concept of high achievers being shattered by the practices of the School. This is particularly true for students who come from prior experiences where their success was expected and achievable, and their close interactions with teachers were a source of guidance, inspiration and encouragement.

The interaction between students and academics in the first-year is limited, and making new friends in School becomes an important element to gain their membership of the community, by means of guidance and encouragement. The role of academics in the first year is dual, and the differences are associated to their position towards the School *doxa*, as it will be further discussed in Chapter 8. Academics are perceived as knowledgeable and they set the expectations to be met based on the values they consider desirable, such as effort, prioritising school over any other activities, organisational skills, time management, and academic skills such as note taking, active reading and academic writing. All of these values and skills are implied in the profile of all students. This expectation legitimises *symbolic violence* practices, and if students fail to achieve this, it is the student and not the institution who is accountable, perceived not to have what it takes to stay.

For students to be allowed to persist, the tangible requirement is to meet academic performativity in form of exams and assignments; hence, all efforts are directed to that end. What I find is that behind the passing marks of each module, students go through an invisible confrontation of a system that allows only certain type of student to stay. What students do in the first semester in order to persist can be summarised in three general

actions: confirm their intention to stay in the course, introduce changes to their academic strategies through the imitation of successful students, and internalise *symbolic violence*.

7.1.1 'For me it was not an option not to do this': decide to stay and take actions.

Becoming a university student is an experience that not only requires academic preparation, but also the ability to take responsible decisions without the close supervision from responsible grown-ups. In their threshold to adulthood, participants experience a sense of freedom that is new to them, and they are suddenly introduced to a world of choices. Similar to *leavers* and *persisters*, *students in progression* find a confusing contrast between the controlling environment of high-school and the *freedom* experienced in university. Now attending lectures or completing readings and coursework are activities that do not have to be subject to the regular scrutiny of lecturers, but are consider activities of relevance for the sake of students' own learning.

The transition to academic elitism is not only confusing but it is experienced as a violent imposition of practices that require significant changes in students' behaviours. These changes need to happen promptly, and one of the main challenges is that they are presented without effective guidance. Students who do not have a suitable prior preparation, or do not have access to the types of capital that facilitate the development of new academic skills, knowledge, characteristics and behaviours needed to be a member of academic elitism, face the disadvantage in a more dramatic way, usually in isolation and with a greater loss of self-worthiness.

Choosing to stay despite the discouragement of low marks and the imposition of values different from what students bring with them requires a commitment, usually sustained by the expectation of an education of high quality and the prospect of becoming a member of a group of power, represented by the role economists have in society. The notion of academic and social integration into the School environment is connected to

identifying if students are able to fit in the model of the school, not whether the system and the student are able to adapt. The changes tends to be unilateral, it is the student who changes, not the institution, not the academics or the school, and the feeling of frustration is generally around the reduced time given to implement changes, the lack of guidance, and the imminent experience of failure, despite the increased efforts to improve.

> *For the first exam I studied for two hours, for the second one I studied for 4 hours, and for the third one 2 days, and I still got 80, so what was going on?... I am not satisfied. From the first semester I've been thinking of a postgraduate degree, and I know that admissions and grants take marks into account, that's very controversial, because in this school it is assumed as normal to get low marks. (Saul, T, L, 2014)*

Saul identifies how the normalisation of low marks represents a potential barrier for his future academic development, and the School *habitus* justifies the practice and categorises it under the notion of academic rigour. Saul does not challenge that practice, his interest in being part of this community is approached by acting the way it is expected, by increasing his study hours, extend his reading beyond the course textbook, and give up his extracurricular activities, including his participation in national sports competitions that were an important part of his life, as he reported in his interview. I see determination, sacrifice and hard work on part of the student, but no discussion of good practices on behalf of lecturers.

The controversy of low marks as a practice that works in detriment of students' future is minimised, as it is not in the interest of academics to challenge those practices to improve future opportunities, something that evidences the *hysteresis* between the School and the broader practices observed in higher education. This means students need to be firm in their decision to stay, regardless of the negative elements around their transition and despite the perceived low interest of the School in supporting student persistence, as Olivia illustrates in recalling her first and only meeting with her tutor.

In that first time he said "I am your tutor, but I am not your psychologist, so if you

have a question regarding school you can come to me, but that's it." He was not a

tutor who would encourage me, and after that we never met again. For me there

was not much interest in encouraging us to stay. (Olivia, FG, T, 2011)

The demands of the course are internalised through experience, not through advice
nor information, and the limited efforts to support students in the transition stage are ruled
by practices that assume a level of *cultural capital* characteristic of the dominant group,
particularly in the form of linguistic and *academic capital*. Students identify the
communication of the School uses *very difficult words,* an example of how linguistic capital
can influence the accessibility to learning activities and a way in which the *habitus* of the
School is imposed to individuals whose linguistic repertoire is markedly different, lower,
from that held by those in power. For Bourdieu (1977), the use of language is an instrument
of differentiation, a way to legitimise how knowledge is presented and understood, and a
mechanism to perpetuate the distance between an accepted member of the community
and the newcomers.

The practice of *productive failure* is part of the learning experience. Students are
encouraged to attempt to solve a task they have not been prepared to complete, with the
purpose of learning from the mistakes (Kapur, 2015). However, the practice observed in the
School misses the element of formative feedback, hence the cost in the form of failure,
shame, discouragement, and loss of control, is internalised by the student. The
development of *academic capital* in the form of skills, knowledge, values and behaviours of
the dominant group is a requirement for membership and is to be developed despite the
initial gap students bring to their university experience and despite the low priority the
School sets on supporting students overcome this challenge. This scenario illustrates how
symbolic violence practices produce an effect on students who feel marginalised and in need

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to prove themselves worthy of being a member of this community from a perspective of disadvantage.

Part of taking control over staying in the course involves for some students an emotional cost. In order to transition into the new context and integrate into academic elitism, students report experiencing what Van Gennep (as cited in Tinto, 1975) identifies as stages of passage, with its initial separation stage. Claudio's experience illustrates the separation stage is not a simple negotiation with family and friends, but a more dramatic decision that leads to ending relationships, adding a sense of loss and withdrawal from the known networks of support he had.

> *The first year was very difficult, my relationship with my mother was bad, I broke up with my girlfriend, and I drifted apart from my friends. It was hard to lose them all in a year, I became tough, less sentimental… I learned to give a place to my dream, I understood that for me it was not an option not to do this, I wanted to do it and I would do whatever it took. (Claudio, T, Non-L, 2009)*

The motivation behind Claudio's choices can be understood in terms of his commitment to his goal, a necessary element behind the decision to stay. In becoming *tough and less sentimental,* Claudio illustrates a mechanism to put his emotions regarding personal relationships in a secondary position, and give his educational objective a prime place in his life. Transitioning into higher education emphasises the importance of separating from past associations and interact in the new ways of the community where individuals are willing to integrate, but cultural differences cannot be ignored in this regard. Mexican families are closely knitted, and most students do not leave home to go to university. The emotional cost of loosing the close connection with parents and friends is not compensated by mechanisms to promote social integration at school, as it has been discussed in previous chapters based on the experience of *leavers* and *persisters*.

In order to earn their membership of academic elitism, *students in progression* understand time as a limited resource that needs to be allocated strategically. This realisation comes with the emotional cost of detaching from family-time. The realisation of the cost of time is one of the most valuable lessons in tactical knowledge to help students persist in the course.

7.1.2 'What do I have to do? What do other people do?': shadowing as an academic development strategy.

The idea of not having a life outside school is a demand that students find hard to meet, it is perceived as unrealistic for a young person who wants to combine a social life, school responsibilities and family and personal activities. The imposition for students to gain their permanence in academic elitism requires them to give up what was important to them and offered them satisfactory rewards. Now, they will have to spend most of their time at School and internalise academic failure in the process of developing academic skills and behaviours to cope with the demands of academic elitism.

It has been discussed how academics distance themselves from students, and I associate this to the fact that academics' assessment and prestige in Mexico is associated to research, not to student development nor student satisfaction, and this premise serves to reinforce the limited provision of support provided to less prepared individuals. Only the few academics who show interest in supporting students and prioritise the student experience over academic performativity provide examples of practices that encourage and facilitate the transition, integration and permanence in the course.

Because academics are not a source of support and students are faced with the idea of working out themselves how to navigate the transition and integration process, staying is down to self-determination. The individualistic culture of the School expects students to be in charge of prompt changes. The school leaves it to the *environment* to spread the values

and skills of the *good learner,* and students in the first semester make use of what is available to them. By shadowing sucsuccessful students, less prepared students learn what their better fit peers do in order to meet the academic requirements of the school.

> *I think in the first semester I didn't have it, and in the second semester yes, you make up your mind: What am I going to do? Am I staying? What do I have to do? What do other people do? They study, so let's study; they go to the laboratory sessions, so let's go to the laboratory sessions; they don't miss sessions, and that's it. I think you imitate people who are here, that is transmitted amongst classmates… all of that is related to staying or leaving the course here. (Fernando, FG, Non-L, 2010)*

and:

> *This was an unconscious imitation change, I would see that in my classmates, I didn´t decide to do that consciously. This is a different type of difficulty. (Saul, T,L, 2014)*

Evidence from international contexts in higher education suggest that even in cases where insittutions provide extensive integration programmes, students keep experiencing university "… as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others. They continue to engage in solo performance and demonstration in what remains a largely show and tell learning environment" (Tinto, 2003, p.1). The practice I identify among first year students resambles what literature describes, as shadowing does not necessarily imply interation, and the process is still characterised by isolation.

Shadowing more experienced or more successful students is a common initial strategy and a frequent advice provided by lecturers. I interpret this as a distancing practice of academics, who put in other students the job of *educating* peers in the ways of the school. The dominant group of either more *natural talented* or more experienced students become role models, as they naturally possess or have been able to develop what it takes to become a successful student in academic elitism.

This practice indirectly promotes the differentiation of students by ability, more successful students gain a position of prestige, and for less prepared students who are located in a low setting in the hierarchy of academic achievement, it is a challenge to gain membership of a group that rewards features they lack. The initial strategy does not necessarily imply a close relationship with peers considered to be in the top group, but to secretly observe them and try to imitate what others do. Saul identifies that strategy in his classmates, but not in himself, as he knows he is in the top setting of his class. For the more privileged group of students, being the object of observation attests their merits and builds confidence about being suitable for academic elitism, but for those in the need to follow them, a different process to prove themselves is experienced.

The ultimate challenge for many students in the context of the present study is how to achieve this transition as promptly as possible, because the longer it takes them to develop effective academic skills and behaviours, the more they tend to fall in a trap of chronic academic failure that can eventually deny them their permanence in academic elitism.

> *It took me the whole first semester to get it, because I would take an exam and I would barely get a 70, and that's it, then ok, I would say I was going to work properly, but I would forget about keeping it day after day. I spent the first semester like that, and I barely passed. The second semester I decided to study every day, to be more organised.(Norma, T, L, 2014)*

7.1.3 'I thought I was gifted… until I came here': School doxa and symbolic violence

In the first year, students struggle to sustain an identity of high-achievement in a School that expects high levels of engagement and low marks. It has been discussed how *leavers* and *peristers* face high levels of stress, and *students in progression* share a similar

experience. Literature identifies the role stress has on the implementation of active coping efforts to persists, and while high levels of stress could work in detriment of attainment, optimal levels of stress could works as an impulse to strive (Shields, 2001). Norma, a student who comes from the top feeder high-school at the UANL, experienced her first struggle with exams as an exercise to adjust her revision strategies.

> *I did poorly in the first exams, because I should have studied with examples, it was*
>
> *not like a right or wrong answer, but explaining why, and that took me a while. I*
>
> *could reason it and say why that was the answer, but I could not verbalise why I*
>
> *knew that was the answer. (Norma, T, L, 2014)*

Learning what is expected from them tends to come a posteriori. Better integrated students report not losing their confidence in being able to meet evaluation standards despite initial negative results. Norma refers to herself as a disciplined student and makes no reference of a self-perception of having extraordinary abilities to explain her academic achievement. She perceives positive academic outcomes as the result of effort and suitable strategies. This attitude shows a level of readiness to university that is not always shared by first-generation students, who come to university with the idea of being exceptionally good and rely on their *innate* skills to succeed.

> *I used to think I knew, I thought I was gifted, I'd say 'yes I'm good at it' until I came*
>
> *here, I realised I was not good and I lacked many things…for the first time you fail a*
>
> *module, this is something that emotionally affects you a lot. (Nelly, FG, L, 2014)*

Nelly's transition from perceiving herself talented to a state of uncertainty and failure is a shared experience by students in the first-year that resembles the experience of students who left the course. The pessimistic discourse used to welcome students has been discussed in previous chapters, and it represents students' initial encounter with a School *doxa* that normalises failure as part of the learning process. In leading students to believe

that failure is imminent, the School *doxa* spread the fatalistic prophesy that contributes to reinforce the power and domination of lecturers and the School system over students.

> *What lecturers expect is not a good mark, but an understanding, lecturers have told me that several times…the first time I failed an exam was in the second semester, 'I've been baptised,' I said, because many had already failed, it had to happen I believe.(Saul, T, L 2014)*

In order to persist, students have to develop a strategy to achieve academic integration that enables them to overcome the normalisation of failure. Even though this process initiates in the first year, it only consolidates in the second year. In facing a discourse of failure for the first time in their lives, there are students who decide not to take initial action and rely on their known abilities and skills, which are generally insufficient to meet the demands of the course. Failure generates a feeling of embarrassment and being inferior, consequently, students in this situation report feeling ashamed and would make an effort to hide, so that others do not identify them as not having the *natural* talent observed among successful peers.

Lecturers' strategy of encouraging students to make an effort is fruitless, because despite the efforts made, they get low marks and eventually find themselves trapped in an academic failure trap. The poor academic results lead to behaviours that promote isolation and distancing, making it more difficult for students who struggle to seek for advice and guidance.

> *In the first semester I got a 35 in maths, for someone used to getting top marks I wanted to die … I felt ashamed in front of those who were doing well, I was uncomfortable hanging out with them. I become isolated, totally isolated. (Tomas, L, T, 2008)*

The loss of confidence, shame and the resulting isolation from peers that Tomas faced are experiences observed among students who left the course, a situation that evidences

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the risk of non-completion Tomas had to overcome. His self-exclusion and his unsatisfactory academic performance were two elements that discouraged engagement, and being suspended from school was a situation of shock that triggered the urgency to implement changes in order to persist.

I interpret this delayed approach not in terms of interest, but in terms of the disconnect students experience between their prior *habitus* and the School *habitus*. Tomas has to take now a position of inferiority compared to his prior experience, he hides his shame and makes efforts for improvement accompanied by frustration, all of this experienced in a position of being in the bottom of the academic hierarchy. This frustration illustrates how *symbolic violence* may be enacted not only through expected values and behaviours, but through a low priority in supporting students who find it difficult to transition into academic elitism. The three approaches I identify on how students internalise the School *doxa* are summarised in Figure 7.1

Figure 7.1 How School doxa is internalised by students in progression

Self-efficacy
- Own their learning
- Stress as a challenge to excel
- Capable of doing it by themselves
- Academic buoyancy

Social capital
- Do what *good* students do
- Failure stress triggers bonding with others
- Need guidance and support, learning communities
- Academic resilience strengthened with support

Passive-delayed
- Overconfidence based on prior-academic achievement
- Stress perceived as a threat, shame, hide.
- Reactive implementation, initially alone, high risk situation
- Late development of academic resilience with family support

Internalise School doxa

Source: Elaborated by author

7.2 Second year experience

Students reach the second year with the notion of normalisation and actual predictability of failing again, and the urge to change academic behaviours in order to meet academic performativity standards and ultimately to prove they are worthy members of an academic elite. The second year is characterised by the consolidation of small learning communities, groups of friends that serve as a safe place where students continue their self-directed development supported by peers. The *hysteresis* between home and School *habitus* becomes more evident and students learn to negotiate new dispositions to attempt to overcome misalignment between family and School life. Finally, in order to persists, students work on their self-concept and reinforce their merit and capacity to keep their place in academic elitism.

7.2.1 'She was like our manager': consolidation of peer-support in the absence of teacher support

In the study of what constructs a sense of belonging, Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow and Salomone (2002) identify perceived peer-support as a key component, together with understanding and empathetic tutors and a comfortable environment perceived in the classroom. Overall, the experience of *students in progression*, similar to what was observed among *persisters*, illustrates that emerging learning communities encourage peer-interactions that create a bond that goes beyond socialisation. Social capital serves the purpose of support, and despite identifying an opportunity to receive encouragement from lecturers, there are limitations in terms of their availability and approachability that prevent students from relying on them to foster a sense of being valued.

While the use of self-efficacy as a skill to approach the course is dominantly observed by students who are more positive about the School *doxa* and feel prepared with better academic skills, less privileged students who initially used shadowing as a strategy based on

learning from better positioned peers extend this practice as they progress in the course. Similar to what I observed among students who persisted, students currently enrolled in the course make use of social capital to internalise the behaviours expected by the School *habitus*.

Students who report feeling prepared to transfer into academic elitism use self-efficacy. These students do not feel threatened by the discourse of academic rigour. I interpret this in terms of the alignment between student's privileged background and the values and behaviour the School enforces. There is a discourse that justifies the practices of the School, identified as necessary to achieve an education of high quality and prestige. This is an example of how students internalise the *individualistic nature* of the School. The transition to academic elitism experienced by rather privileged students is characterised by achievement based not only on capabilities and effort, but also on the notion of alignment with the particular practices of the School.

> *There are people who did not realise the importance of lecturers' insistence on breaking your head. Breaking your head for me meant persistence, making an effort, focusing, turn TV off on Sunday, I was here to learn. (Claudio, T, Non-L, 2009)*

Claudio is able to interpret lecturers' advice and takes specific actions that result in a progressive success. For Claudio, the initial low or failing marks do not represent a sense of being defeated, but an experience that requires adjustments. Here is where academic buoyancy plays a fundamental role to persist. Literature defines it as the ability a student has 'to successfully deal with academic setbacks and challenges that are typical of the ordinary course of school life' (Martin and Marsh, 2008: p.72), and the *habitus* of this context imposes failing exams is internalised as such.

Perceiving a failed exam as a minor setback and not as an overwhelming experience is congruent with the internalisation and reproduction of the dominant culture in School. However, for students who use social support as a means to overcome the academic

challenges, the consolidation of a strong support group is achieved through time and is reshaped in the second year. Tinto suggests the use of a scheme of learning communities to 'involve students both socially and intellectually in ways that promote cognitive development' (2003, p. 2), but different from literature, students at the School of Economics self-organise those communities, as it was noted also in the experiences of *leavers* and persister.

Fernando's experience recalls what *persisters* identified as *learning to howl.* In a similar situation, the encouragement provided by peers was accompanied by the development of academic skills needed to succeed, and a consolidation of interest in the course emerged along the process. The perception of being valued by a group contributes to social bonding characterised by academic support, and the relationship promotes behaviours that help improve academic advancement, and consequently help students earn their membership of the community.

> *She's the best person and the best student I've met….never met anyone like her, she would help us in everything, she would make us study, put pressure on us, she would tell us to rest, she was like our manager, and a friend at the same time, it was really good… I never considered leaving School again. (Fernando, FG, Non-L, 2010)*

A successful example of peer-support illustrates the importance of a leading member of the group identified to promote cohesion and for decision-making purposes. After experiencing a deterioration of their self-perception in the first year, students emphasise the importance of receiving a vote of confidence from peers perceived as successful and fit, and how this makes a difference in their notion of membership and willingness to make an effort to stay. Fernando did not take control over his academic activities, he relied on the guidance of a student he identified as a knowledgeable and positive influence to direct his efforts to work towards internalising a *doxa* that informs students their outcomes are the fruit of their effort, when in fact there is more than merit behind success.

Teaching practices and distancing imposed by lecturers leads students to make use of the communal potential of small groups (Braxton & Hirschy, 2004). Identifying a group of students with shared values, beliefs, and goals, is observed as a change in the second year. The organisation of small learning communities protects students from the shame of exposing themselves to a larger audience and to the lecturer. It is learning without a sense of inferiority or embarrassment.

I tried to contact that supportive student who was mentioned in repeated occasions by both *persisters* and *students in progression*. To my surprise, I found she had left the course a few years back due to a personal situation that had led her to stop her studies and move back home. It is evident from participants' experiences that her presence in the School had left a positive impact, she generated the difference between leaving and staying the course for some of her peers, her departure represents a loss for the student community. Students who face personal problems that put their permanence at risk illustrate the potential *hidden injuries* derived from the distancing practices discussed earlier, which discourage students from discussing personal problems with tutors, and contributes to the stigma around the emotional and more personal challenges faced by students.

7.2.2 *'I know they won't laugh at me': developing positive relationships with lecturers*

In the second year, students whose academic trajectories are in the bottom segment of the academic hierarchy report experiencing a sense of fear that triggers physical reactions when they are in contact with lecturers, such as involuntary shaking or profuse sweating. Students have doubts in class but refrain from asking to avoid exposing their *ignorance* in front of lecturer and peers, putting at risk their membership of a community where students are expected to be academically talented. Students in general perceive themselves as a low

priority for academics, understood not as a personal choice but a choice based on the maximisation of a personal goal.

> *Students are in a very low position in the priorities of the School, for the majority of young lecturers, their priority is their professional development. (Sergio, T, L, 2010)*

Additionally, students openly express feeling unable to approach lecturers with their questions, based on the perception of inferiority reinforced by the impossibility to understand the content of modules and pass exams. Students adopt an inferior position in comparison to the perceived superiority that puts lecturers, as Cristobal illustrates it "like a supreme god of the subject." Lecturers are there but cannot be reached, the domination exercised by lecturers using *knowledge as power* represents a mechanism of symbolic power that shapes how students' perceive the social order within the school. This is found particularly relevant in exam related situations, such as sitting exams and review of marking.[17]

> *If I feel some sort of tension with the lecturer, even if the module is not too difficult, it becomes catastrophic to me...I don't think the school is aware of how the relationship between student and lecturer affects marks. (Carolina, T, Non-L, 2010)*

and:

> *A lecturer once asked me 'why didn't you approach me to get feedback, some of your answers were not that bad', I was furious. (Tania, Non-L, 2010)*

In the example provided by Tania, there is an incongruity between the discourse of academics, who present themselves as approachable and open to discuss assessment, and the relationship between power, culture, and pedagogic practices that encourage students to stay away, as illustrated by Carolina. The distancing practices experienced by students

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[17] Students can appeal against academic judgement of their work.

legitimise the choice of not approaching lecturers for clarification, and the words of the lecturer convey a contradictory sense of approachability that is only presented a posteriori, when the student has no possibility to appeal against academic judgement of their work.

Despite the many examples of distancing and *symbolic violence* observed in the relationship between students and lecturers, evidence in this study illustrate the positive impact of affirmative interactions with lecturers over students' intentions to persist. By presenting themselves authentically approachable to students, lecturers contribute to reduce the anxiety generated by the intimidating image of power. These are lecturers who challenge the *doxa* of the School, and they are characterised by a caring attitude.

> *He sets incentives and makes me want to continue… it is trust, you can talk to him, he will help you, he finds the way to help each and every one of his students, and that's what I consider different… there are many who lack that, they may know a lot, but they lack being humble. I don't mean to offend anyone, but they need to be closer to students. (Bernardo, FG, Non-L, 2012)*

Bernardo presents his opinion with regard to distancing practices in an apologetic way, a protective strategy of a student who feels like an outsider in a *habitus* which promotes distancing practices between students and lecturers. The ideology of the dominant group, economists, is strongly based on individuality and competition, on rationality and effort; this makes vulnerability a non-desirable characteristic. The pedagogic practices that dominate the teaching in School set barriers between lecturers and students. The objective is to homogenise students to meet a profile of academic elitism, and in order to achieve this goal inequity, non-inclusion and marginalisation are examples of *symbolic violence* observed within the School environment.

Evidence shows that feeling close to lecturers helps students gain their membership of academic elitism because it sends them the right signal, the notion that they have something that differentiates them from the rest of their peers and encourages them to

make an effort. In the sample of participants in this study, this experience was identified among students who share some elements of privilege, not in terms of economic capital, but in terms of academic capabilities.

> *Getting close to [name of lecturer] has helped me become more precise in my research… she offered me a scholarship, she saw something in me, that means I have to make a greater effort, that made me want to do more and more. (Tania, T, Non-L, 2010)*

Tania's experience can be interpreted in terms of selectivity practices. Lecturers associate with those students who share the values and behaviours desired by the dominant group in power and receive the benefits of being welcomed into the community. It is important to emphasise that Tania, despite her experience in failing modules, has a profile of privilege with access to economic, social and *cultural capital* that allow her to develop the abilities necessary to fit in the School. She does not report any instance of feeling afraid of lecturers, but she has a strong discourse against the unfairness of the assessment practices in School and her struggle is not from a position of inferiority.

For students who do not show the desired profile of academic elitism, a positive yet different experience with academics helps promote a sense of not being fully rejected. Throughout the second year, students identify opportunities to participate in class in a safe way, protected from the embarrassment generated by making mistakes or not being as bright as their *naturally talented* peers are. Even though it is still a form of violence, less privileged students find refuge under the wing of lecturers who put a stop to the dynamic of lowering students based on their academic talent.

> *It's one of the sessions where I am not afraid of being asked or if I make a mistake I don't feel afraid, because I know they won't laugh at me or think I am stupid... it's very important, how the lecturer treats you during the lessons. (Anna, FG, L, 2012)*

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In this experience, Anna does not refer to gaining her membership of the group yet, but she is moving away from rejection and this allows her to continue with her efforts to earn her membership. The pathway for those students who struggle in their progression is full of barriers that are invisible to the members of the dominant culture of the School. Consequently, not participating in class is interpreted as a self-selection behaviour that could denote a lack of preparation based on a lack of effort. The marginalisation and non-inclusion of students becomes a normalised practice that puts responsibility on the student and not on the School environment. Better-prepared peers show more confidence in their interaction with lecturers in class, a behaviour that aligns more naturally with the School *doxa*. Academics interpret this behaviour as a sign of interest and hard work, elements that in the eyes of the group of power build up academic achievement, permanence, and membership. Conversely, the elements of fear, rejection and embarrassment are linked to lack of preparation, inferiority, and lack of engagement, which represent elements associated with failure.

7.2.3 'We know we can make it': proving themselves

In students' discourse, the main barrier to completion is academic failure. However, behind effort and capability, there are elements that students perceive as beyond their control. Students perceive exams are written in a way that makes it intentionally difficult to pass, a barrier more than an instrument to promote learning development. Hence, passing exams becomes the way to prove themselves to lecturers and peers, and all their efforts are set to the goal of passing.

> *No matter how much you studied, went to lectures, answered problem sets and took notes, it was very sad that sometimes I spent two or three nights without sleeping, preparing for the exam, expecting at least a 70 or 65, and getting 20 or 30, it was very depressing. (Olivia, FG, L, 2011)*

If a few students are able to pass exams, lecturers interpret this as a confirmation that exams are aligned with the expectations of the module, and pedagogic practices are legitimised, as it will be further discussed in Chapter 8. This notion perpetuates the *symbolic violence* of the curriculum of the School, designed to fit the more advantaged students, and for those who make an effort and do not see positive results, questioning the assessment practices means questioning power, and students fear the confrontation. What is left for students is to internalise the cost of the gap between their profile and the desired profile of the school, and the lack of systematic support. Students have to strive, *'echarle ganas',* to survive and maintain their effort and motivation despite the abandonment and the negative results obtained. The internalisation of the individual as the origin of the problem leads students and academics to reinforce the idea that in order to stay and become a member of this community, students have to be transformed, and they have to find the means to close the gap.

> *Failing a module does not mean you are not good for the course, if you are struggling then organise yourself better… you will make it if you want to make it, échale ganas. (Cristobal, T,L, 2013)*

Research in academic buoyancy suggest two elements are salient in contributing to developing the capacity to overcome academic setbacks: psychological factors, such as self-esteem, control and self-efficacy; and school community factors, including caring and supportive relationships with peers and teachers (Martin & Marsh, 2008). It has been discussed how support from academics is very limited and discouraged in the way academic elitism is understood in the context of this study, hence students find support in their peers, and together they work not only to achieve the academic goals presented to them, but to recover a displaced confidence and positive self-perception. In their small groups they find the strength to believe they have what it takes to stay and progress in the course, and proving themselves to others is behind the effort put on academic work.

> *I come from a state school, I feel my education there was nothing, I was asleep*
>
> *there, I came here and I noticed the level of my classmates… I used to hang out with*
>
> *those who knew because I felt I knew nothing, and then with time I learned it is not*
>
> *like that, I realised I could learn by myself. (Lore, FG, Non-L, 2012)*

A central element identified in the road to gaining membership of academic elitism is the importance of time. *Students in progression* emphasise the frustration of not being able to reach the transformation needed at an earlier stage in the course, and the cost implicit in the delay of that learning. The delay can be understood in terms of misguided efforts, limited resources invested in providing support to close the gap for less prepared students and the challenges of limited resources faced by disadvantaged students. These elements are not part of the discourse of the School in terms of efforts to promote persistence, because retention is not a goal of the group in power. The individualistic nature imposed by the values of the dominant culture allow this phenomenon to perpetuate. Students who require more time to develop the skills to fit into the School *doxa* learn this lesson throughout their second year.

In the experience of proving themselves worthy members of the community, female students report differences in comparison to their male peers, and even though I have limited evidence to make a generalisation, it is relevant to note the discourse that claims there is an advantage of being a woman in the way they are assessed, with a patronising notion behind.

> *I needed one point in an exam to pass and he [the lecturer] gave me a pass, and a*
>
> *guy who did not get a pass said "it´s because you are a woman." I think it is more*
>
> *about the lecturer knowing you go to class, if he asks you something you can*
>
> *answer, it is not about being a man or a woman. (Delia, T, L, 2013)*

and:

I want to feel I can discuss with men as equal, they say we are intellectually inferior,

so I want to show them they are wrong… I want to be prepared, to do a PhD, have a

good life, work at an institution where I can be a leader, to show that a woman can

do things well. (Nuria, FG, L, 2012)

Economics is a field dominated by men, and in their experience, some female students report feeling in a lower position in comparison to their male peers, and make reference to a discourse that suggests their permanence is associated to unfair preferential treatment and not their own merits. Issues related to sexism are emerging in the debate of the current state of economics education in higher education, and further research in this area needs to be addressed in the interest of closing the gap of gender based inequality.

7.3 Third year experience

I find the third year to be the most extenuating of all. It is characterised by the constant academic demands and a depleted drive to sustain engagement. A new role is added to peers, who become a source of caring and emotional support, and not only a reference of good academic practices. Parents are allies in this stage, and thanks to financial and emotional support from their family, students are able to work to towards completion. One of the most important resources students need in order to keep their membership of the community is time, and the provision of financial resources and not having the need to work are key to succeed in the course.

7.3.1 'You need a moment to relax': the importance of self-care and wellbeing

It has been discussed that only few academics foster positive and caring interactions with students. Lynch (2010) identifies that the careleness *doxa* in higher education tends to leave this job to women, and being a male dominated School that discourages vulnerability

and closeness with students, the priority of promoting students' wellbeing is almost non-existing. The undergraduate degree in economics is characterised by a discourse of rigour, intensive workload, and long-hours at School. Literature emphasises an observed consequence of excessive workloads is stress, which is associated with negative effects on performance, satisfaction, well-being, and achievement (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). Not surprisingly, in the present study participants report a negative effect triggered by the School environment.

> *The minute you enter the school you feel down, it happens to me, I leave for lunch, or*
>
> *a moment of relax you find, and you walk back into school and you feel the pressure*
>
> *(Nina, FG, L, 2012)*

Martin (2010) identifies how students in higher education tend not to disclose mental health issues out of fear of being discriminated, and the importance of addressing the stigma around this issue in order to improve the provision of student support. Contrary to the wide spread practices in higher education in first world nations, mental health issues are not actively addressed in public higher education in Mexico, and the tabu around this condition makes it hard for students to reach out for help.

> *Some people would feel bad about going to a psychologist, especially because*
>
> *coming to this school requires some mental and emotional strength, so considering*
>
> *our culture, there would be a judgement. (Tania, T, Non-L, 2010)*

Students suffer mental health in silence, and turn to friends from school and family as sources of assistance. Tania identifies the stigma around receiving professional help in dealing with mental health issues, and in other interviews participants express awareness of the negative association of seeking for help in dealing with stress, depression and anxiety issues. Nelly, who is only starting her second year, reports she has trouble sleeping, experiences anxiety attacks at midnight and avoids talking about the issue with her parents

because she does not want to worry them. Without professional support at school to approach this situation, and under a culture that expects students to be naturally talented and resourceful, students find in friends and family the so needed support.

> *Many students are under a lot of stress because they study and don't pass and spend day and night studying, I always tell them 'you need a moment to relax, to recharge your batteries and come with a different attitude'. (Vicente, FG, L, 2012)*

There are other instances of students' attempts to promote self-care through the practice of sports. Nina makes reference to a request presented to the head of the School, asking for support to organise a swimming team. The response emphasised the priority of the School is to create economists, and that in order to receive any economic support to organise sports activities, students had to prove they were making satisfactory progress by passing all their modules in the first opportunity, a situation that is rarely achieved by the most dedicated students.

> *We are having a hard time, it is ok to get encouragement to 'echarle ganas' to School, but we are young and we want to do other things. Sometimes you feel like you want to give up, but if you recharge your batteries you can come with a different attitude… students' needs are not taken into account. (Nina, FG, L, 2012)*

Students are in a constant *fighting to survive*, and their need for a way to approach physical and mental problems such as exhaustion, tiredness and the stress generated is not a priority for the School authorities. The restricted opportunities to practice self-care are accompanied by a negative discrimination around academic performance results in students being trapped in a loop that ultimately generates negative attitudes towards the School environment. In an environment of high stress and high individualisation, students identify a gap in the provision of self-care and emotional support. The culture of the School encourages students to use time in a particular way, with academic activities at the top of

priorities and discouraging activities that could distract students from their studies. The fact that pastoral care is not provided at school sends a distinct signal to students with regard to the priority that individual wellbeing has in the School environment, and the limited sports activities offered to students reduces the opportunities to find an escape from the daily stress generated by the workload of the modules.

As students make progression in the course, the need for change in the culture of the School becomes more evident, and Claudio illustrates an awareness of the collective nature of internalising the *doxa* that allows negative elements to become part of the norm. In his interview, he makes reference to the importance of having an area for students to rest, the importance of having facilities that help students feel comfortable and treated with respect in School, and how ignoring students' needs beyond the academic realm has become part of the norm.

> *There are small improvement that could be done and I don't know if they are not done given a lack of interest of because we want to do things as they have always been done, in a sort of collective stupidity. (Claudio, T, Non-L, 2009)*

Students in the third year are burnout and they do not have a healthy escape to promote self-care. Under this scenario friends from outside the context of School represent a key element in the pathway to persistence. Those friends become a source of advice and reassurance that help students reduce risky practices in detriment of their wellbeing.

> *My friends from outside school are there for me, 'calm down, you will make it, everything will be all right' (Carolina, T, Non-L, 2010)*

and:

> *There are key people in my experience, when I had doubts or questions I approached them, friends from outside school, I see wisdom, congruence, I admire them. (Fernando, FG, Non-L, 2010)*

Turning to people external from the context of the School is a practice that acknowledges the value of associations students have outside and the importance of encouragement without the judgement or profiling from someone who is immerse in the same experience that represents the source of the problem. Family takes a central role in the provision of support to be able to survive the experience of marginalisation and other forms of *symbolic violence* imposed by a culture of elitism, as it will be discussed in the next subsection.

7.3.2 "If there is someone who can make it, that is you": parental support and encouragement

Different from the experience of *leavers*, *students in progression* receive full support from their parents in the form of provision of economic capital to stay, time availability to be fully dedicated to their studies, and the notion of high value of education, regardless of *cultural capital* at home. The availability of economic capital to participate in a course of elitism that demands a full time enrolment represents an significant advantage that translated into time availability, but beyond the support in terms of material resources, the involvement of parents matters because it reassures students the notion that they belong to an environment of high achievement.

> *When I told my parents I had failed a module my father asked what I had to do, so I explained and they have understood me more than I expected, and they support me a lot…my mom calms me down and tells me 'you know this is a difficult course, but you're intelligent.' (Anna, FG, L, 2012)*

Even though parents are not able to engage in conversations related to the topics studied in the modules, parents' engagement helps students recover their self-concept and somehow *recharge their batteries* to continue. Different from the experience of students

who left the course, Tomas reports having financial support from his parents, which means he was dedicated full-time to his studies with no need to divert his efforts from his interest in becoming an economist. For Tomas, a key element that helped him continue was an introspective exercise to restore the idea that he was capable of overcoming the challenge and completing the degree. The impact of the moral support and guidance received from his father is reported by Tomas as the changing event that guided him in finding the strength and motivation to continue.

> *'If I knew you couldn't make it, ok, but if there is someone who can make it, that is you.' Being told this is like, wow, but hearing it from your dad is like one thousand times more powerful, so it was like, he was right. (Tomas, L, T, 2008)*

The exercise of self-awareness and reflection on what he was facing helped Tomas get back on track to restore his confidence as a student. The encouragement came from an agent that was not connected to the source of his experience of failure, but from his father, who represents an authority with a respected opinion. Tomas' experience helps illustrate how important it is for students to receive a vote of trust, to reconnect with their capabilities and put aside the classification imposed by the School *doxa* of not being *bright and talented* as a desired feature of those deserving to be part of this elite.

The encouragement received from parents is of great importance for persistence. The personal challenge to prove themselves accompanies students who complete their first year with the objective of building a reconciliation with their lost identity.

7.4 Fourth year experience

Literature on student engagement states it is a multidimensional construct, with three identified types of engagement: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). A sense of belonging is one of the key elements in emotional engagement, and it is identified as an element that promotes persistence in higher

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education (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Parkes, 2014; Thomas, 2012). I have discussed in previous chapters that being accepted and feeling welcomed in School develops positive attitudes associated with academic success and persistence, and it can be achieved by means of relationships with others involved in the experience, namely peers and academic staff. In the analysis of the experience of *students in progression*, earning their membership of academic elitism is a process that requires constant reassessment of the different types of engagement adopted, and the capacity to overcome the hidden injuries of practices that privilege those who have what it takes to succeed.

'I think it was a matter of gaining confidence in myself again.*'* Those are the words of Tomas, who is only months away from graduating after years spent in this School. His experience was characterised by an early loss of self-confidence associated to a single exam that marked an experience of isolation and constant renegotiation of his self-perception. Having nearly completed his formation as economist, he states:

> *If someone asked me what economic intuition is I wouldn't know what to say. I guess you get it by reading, after spending six years in this school, I feel I have developed it, a bit… I am becoming one of them. (Tomas, T, L 2008)*

Students in the fourth year report no intention to leave the course, and the only reason considered for not graduating is not meeting academic requirements to pass a module. By the time students approach the end of the fourth year of progression, levels of anxiety and stress are reduced, assessment practices change and are mostly based on assignments and class presentations, students tend to have developed better strategies to organise their learning and time. At this stage, students who have a history of struggle in the course realise the process of transformation they have experienced, and reflect on the elements that would have facilitated their experience in the course.

I would tell students in the first semester not to pay attention to what others say about the course being very difficult, it has some level of complexity, but the key is perseverance, we don't come here with the same abilities, I mean, some come with abilities and they don't struggle much, for others it takes a bit longer to develop. I don't really know how to explain it… I'm a self-taught person. (Luis, T, L, 2009)

In the final stage of the course, students identify the goal of *becoming an economist* is achieved, and it is identified through the capacity to develop a fundamental skill for the economic science, *economic intuition.* But one element is salient in the retrospective account on what Luis identifies as necessary to succeed and persist the course: the importance of having someone to guide you, the importance of having a mentor interested in offering advice to develop *what works* in an environment that imposes practices of *symbolic violence* that promote marginalisation of less prepared and disadvantaged students who do not meet the initial profile of a *natural* candidate.

In asserting he is currently doing for others what would have worked for him, Luis identifies the value this practice has on the academic experience. Similarly, perseverance is identified as a fundamental ability needed to stay, and implicit from his experience, time availability. Interestingly, Luis is not able to explain how the development of the skills needed to succeed was achieved, except for the known discourse of the School *doxa*, which states that in order to succeed, students have to have *what it takes,* that unknown skill that has finally revealed.

Summary

Students in progression provide an overview of barriers to overcome in the progression of the course. In the same way student development is expected as part of the university experience, barriers also show to follow a developmental path, and tend to become more complex as students reach the half of the progression in the course. For students to be able to stay, a constant self-assessment of strategies and attitudes is required, and the academic integration is an extended process characterised by identity loss and emotional costs.

The institutional interest in promoting an environment with a discourse of academic rigour is achieved through mechanisms of *symbolic violence*, with an evident use of knowledge as power. Distancing practices generate in students a sense of abandonment and forced into a School *doxa* that generates a silent suffering in dealing with poor academic results despite high levels of effort. Once again, evidence shows the commitment of the School is with selectivity and students have to earn their membership through academic performativity. Peers and family are the *allies* of students in this battle against an elitist system Students gradually internalise that individual elements of a social and psychological nature, such as isolation, stress, anxiety, loss of self-confidence and fear of failure, are to be handled individually, it matters only to them and those who care for them, usually family and peers who become close friends.

The ultimate result is students who succeed in continuing in the course based on internalising a School *doxa* that pushes them to develop an individualistic strategy to meet academic requirements, generating higher levels of stress and anxiety associated with academic demands. Membership is not granted upon admission, it is earned. Students are exposed to a violent transformation process characterised by inequity, marginalisation, and non-inclusion of those who lack the natural talent desired but are determined to secure a place in a group of elite and power by means of effort and determination.

8. Faculty Members' Perceptions of Students' Decision to Stay or Leave the Course in Academic Elitism

The role teachers and tutors play on students' decision to complete or leave their studies calls for efforts to explore the perspective of faculty members on the barriers to completion experienced by students (Astin, 1984; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Pascarella, 1980; Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1997), and this chapter offers an analysis of the data obtained from twenty semi-structured interviews conducted with academics teaching the undergraduate course under study. Evidence illustrates a divided understanding among faculty members and a clear case of *hysteresis* between academic elitism and the broader higher education system.

I identify that lecturers who prioritise academic rigour and performativity tend to distance themselves from students. In the eyes of those academics, students are fully responsible for the decision to leave the course, due to poor readiness to succeed in this academic context, a lack of academic buoyancy, low levels of effort, and for *not having what it takes to become an economist*. For academics in this group, successful students *reveal* themselves as economists, and because they come to the course with what it takes to succeed, they can be taught under the teaching model and academic practices known to them, the *doxa* of the School is legitimised in those students.

On the other hand, I find a smaller group of lecturers who show an interest in getting to know students in a more holistic way. For these lecturers, what works in order to promote persistence is to develop communication, approachability and empathy. They show themselves to students as individuals who also struggle, and express interest and availability to supporting students outside the classroom. These lecturers acknowledge their influence on the student experience, but express the frustration of being restricted by the School *doxa*, which prioritises academic practices that align with better-fit students, a

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situation that promotes the marginalisation of disadvantaged students and distancing practices. Faculty members' perceptions are summarised in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1 Faculty Members' perception of barriers to completion
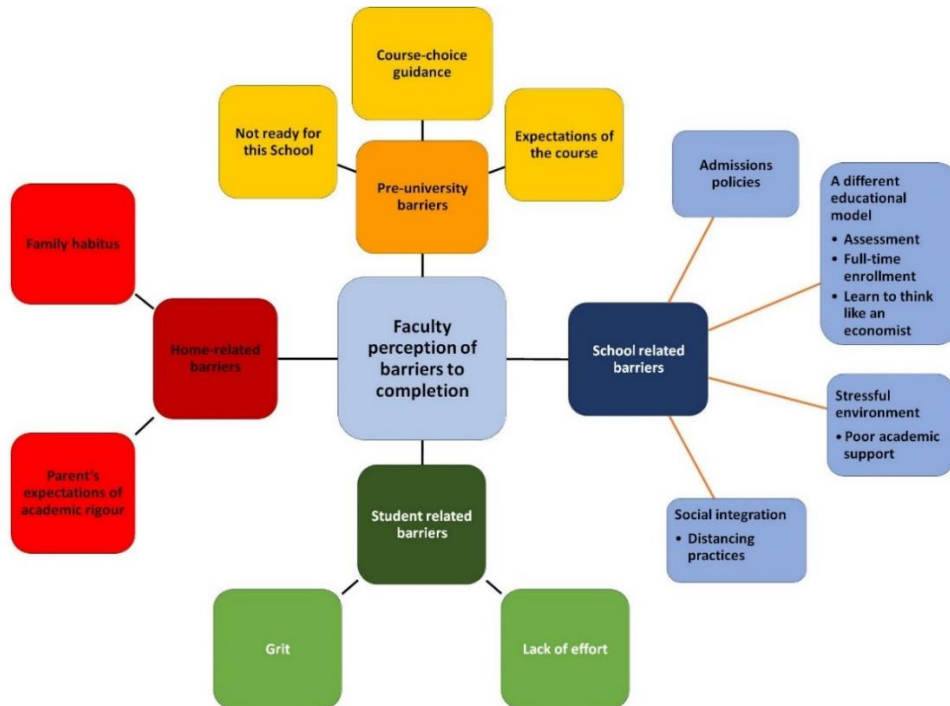
Source: Elaborated by author

In the following subsections, I present a discussion on the perceptions identified in the discourse of faculty members. For anonymity purposes, academics' names have been omitted and a number has been assigned to each of them. Two annotations accompany the number of each participant; the first one indicates whether they are tutors, former tutors, or non-tutors, with reference to their participation in the pastoral care programme; and as alumni, for those who graduated from the School under study, and non-alumni, for those who graduated from a different school. Female members of academic staff are a minority in this community, and in order to protect their identity, they are not identified in the study. Similarly, the characteristic of being a non-economists will not be highlighted, to protect faculty anonymity.

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8.1 Pre-University barriers

In the category of pre-university barriers, I will elaborate on three observed subcategories: academic preparation, including the preparedness students bring from their previous educational experience; course-choice guidance, particularly the support or lack thereof received in making a decision to study this particular course; and expectations students have on the course and the School.

Opening access to higher education to a broader spectrum of candidates represents a challenge to higher education institutions. As it was discussed earlier, students come from diverse educational backgrounds, and despite not having a wide range of routes into higher education, the variation in the quality of prior schooling in Mexico is wide, depending on the nature of the institution attended, private or public, and the sociodemographic characteristics of the School (CONEVAL, 2017). At the School of Economics, most students come from feeder schools, high-schools that are part of the same university system, and according to lecturers' experience, the preparation students acquire varies from one high-school to another. The heterogeneity of *academic capital* students bring to their experience in academic elitism generates complex academic integration issues.

8.1.1 Not ready for this School

Being ready to go to university requires students to have acquired content knowledge relevant to the area of study and skills and abilities that prepare them to meet the academic demands of a course. Faculty members refer to students' lack of academic preparedness to meet the demands of the course, and many of them attribute responsibility to high-school and even secondary-school education for this lack of preparedness, as one of the lecturers observed:

(…) the way maths is taught in high-school is extremely deficient, the best students are those who memorise the procedures and don't get to understand them, let alone be able to apply them in economics. (FM01, tutor, alumni)

Academics confirm what students in previous chapters have reported, the mismatch between what they were expected to produce in prior education and the type of mathematical reasoning and problem solving they will be required to use in their undergraduate course. The memorisation of procedures as an approach to learning mathematics is an element that needs to be replaced by a more analytical approach, a problem the School is strained with. This scenario explains how the *academic capital* students bring is insufficient under the context of the field of economics in a programme of academic elite, what students know is no longer enough to progress.

A strategy implemented in School has been running mandatory pre-sessional mathematics sessions for those students who fail to pass the mathematics diagnostic test developed by the School. Faculty members admit the deficiencies in prior mathematical education are a priority to approach, but insist this is an issue that should concern the student more than the School. Expecting students to make up for the misalignment between prior education and the demands of the course is a practice that separates the School from the failure of an educational system:

We face a dilemma, should I lower the level of my module? Should I spend my time teaching them what they should have learnt in basic education? Or should I point them at books and websites to improve those deficiencies? I do the latter (FM15, non-tutor, non-alumni)

Academics observe the broader education system fails to prepare students not to meet the expectation of a university degree, but the expectations of academic elitism. Faculty members internalise this *unfortunate* scenario and expect students to be able to learn how the *game* is regulated. The School *habitus* becomes the source of that *feel for the*

game, with no clear rules set, students have to internalise them through experience. The origin of the problem as well as the solution is perceived to be beyond the possibilities of lecturers, and this position is the foundation of a *habitus* of selectivity and elitism that works in an individualistic environment. The programme of modules is reported to be very ambitious, leaving no room to dedicate time to clarify doubts of students who struggle to keep the pace of the progression of lessons. The logic of practice of academic elitism determines the way the course is expected to be experienced:

> *It is their problem regarding their prior preparation, and also their habits, and a clear way to see it is when they are placed in a prestigious institution, they see their classmates, same age as them, able to handle certain levels and do not struggle, but they do, why? There are deficiencies they have to correct (…) Students and the institution should work together, lecturers are there too, but we have limitations. (FM13, former tutor, not-alumni)*

Academic elitism is not for everyone, but for anyone who has the natural talent or the resources and dispositions to transform and become a *new type of person.* The detachment of academics illustrates the interest in maintaining a standard in the preparation offered to students. In academics' perspective, education in academic elitism is not meant to be an education of equity, and even the concept of making an effort to *correct deficits* incorporates a discourse that dismisses the *not so talented ones*. The dispositions, practices and values that build the School *habitus* are closely knitted to a *field* of an elite higher education system.

Trow (2010) states that elite systems aim at reproducing leading positions in society, while mass or universal systems provide a broader supply of white collar professionals and technically qualified staff. The School under study illustrates how elite institutions within a mass system resemble what Bourdieu (as cited in Steinmetz, 2011) identifies as the *hysteresis* of *habitus*, or the Quixote effect, that captures the mismatches between a *habitus*

that is not aligned with the demands of the present conditions of the broader higher education system. The *habitus* of the School resembles the conditions of the origins of higher education, a *field* for the selected few prepared for self-formation through the guidance and close interaction with academics. However, today's dominant view of higher education has expanded to serve the needs of the labour market, the development of the economy of nations, and for social mobility purposes. For the School, the misalignment is centred on students not being ready for the School, but from an outsider perspective, the misalignment can be interpreted as this School not being able, or willing, to integrate the new paradigms of higher education.

8.1.2 Course-choice guidance

In choosing a course, literature suggests a set of variables influencing students' decision, such as gender, ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic status, qualifications of teaching staff, school status, etc. (Tripney, et al., 2010), but studies rarely suggest students have a clear understanding of what a course is about, and the decision is rather based on school reputation, student ability, and other individual and school-related variables that do not imply what academics in this study expect from students.

Faculty members observe that students usually choose economics because it is known to be a hard and demanding course of prestige, regardless of the interest or knowledge of the subject area. Academics know students who come to this course like to be challenged. Additionally, for first-generation students and their parents, the promise of an education that could offer opportunities of social mobility is an attractive feature to decide to enrol. Faculty members identify misinformed course choices explain early leaving if the reasons behind their choice serve purposes that will not sustain the effort required to succeed in this School. According to faculty, candidates should base their decision on their interest in the

field and not by the appeal of the course as being a trophy that reinforces an image of high-achievement or a promise of a high-paid job:

> *The first reason why you should or should not be in this School is that you like what you do. If you like it, even if you're not a brilliant mind and you don't have great abilities, you will spend time on it, will enjoy it, and you will do fine. (FM05, tutor, alumni)*

The statement above assumes a type of prior knowledge students lack in reality. The role of economists in society is rather obscure, *leavers* reported seen economists as individuals in position of limited access, such as being the President, or positions of power *making important decisions* without a clear concept of what that actually means in the world. For *persisters,* being an economist implied a role of prestige, a game changer in society, but the descriptions lacked clarity in the typo of job they would be able to take upon graduation. Knowing if they like the subject area can hardly be decided in advance, as this is not a profession with clear visibility in society, as it is the case of medicine, law or engineering. I identify a gap in the form the School engages in information activities to provide candidates with a clearer notion of what economists do in society, in order to better inform the course choice process.

> *We still have a lot to do in that regard, but we are never asked to give that information and we don't contact them either… if I had to speak as a bureaucrat, I would say that the course-choice guidance department is good but we, as teaching staff, we don't pay much attention to them. (FM18, tutor, alumni)*

8.1.3 Expectations of the course

Literature on retention and course completion suggests that the congruence between institutional attributes and students' needs, interests, and preferences plays a key role in

promoting satisfaction and retention amongst university students. Tinto (1993) argues that the incongruence or misfit between students' needs, interests, and preferences and those of the institution have an impact on students' decisions to drop out.

For those students who claim to be sure economics is what they really want to do, and feel they have made the right course choice, academics identify the lack of understanding of how this School has a strong academic and theoretical approach as opposed to a more applied curriculum. Academics identify this to be a salient element that drives students to decide to leave the course, not only in the first year, but in more advanced points of progression, and regardless of their academic performance.

The programme follows a neoclassical mainstream curriculum (see Chapter Three, 3.2), with a highly technical approach that sometimes makes it hard for students to connect with the social problems they are interested in studying, and lecturers find this gap between expectations and reality to be a reason why students decide to leave the course:

> *Some realise this is not what they like, they have an idea of the problems and the way to approach them and they say, no, this is not what I want, this is too technical, too cold, not connected to reality (…) they don't see the connection and are not willing to follow a very technical pathway. (FM04, non-tutor, non-alumni)*

The interests of students in transferring their knowledge in a rather pragmatic way are misaligned with the priority given to a theoretical approach to the study of the field. The dispute over what is applicable for employability purposes in the view of students differs from what academics perceive to have a higher symbolic value. Faculty members refer to initial efforts to close the gap, but the strategies used to present the information fail to convey what the course is about. In an attempt to communicate a sense of academic elitism and prestige, faculty members present threatening scenarios and implement practices of *symbolic violence* which emphasise that students have to *learn to deal with that.* The notion that in the absence of natural talent, hard work is the strategy to cope serves as a

foundation that emphasises the sense of deficit of students who fail to achieve satisfactory results in assessments.

The disconnect between the *doxa* of the School under the umbrella of academic elitism, and the conditions of the expansion of higher education, illustrate students are only able to gain an idea of what they are enrolled into after they have started the course. For academics, their role is limited to be bystanders of a process of awareness a posteriori:

> *For many students it does not matter how much we tell them, they don't get it, like Saint Thomas, seeing is believing.* (FM09, tutor, alumni)

8.2 School-related barriers

The School-related barriers associated with the dispositions, practices, and values that construct the School *habitus* are organised in five sets (see Figure 8.2); those associated with the admissions policies; the educational model, including assessment, and academic support; a stressful environment, linked to pedagogical practices; social integration elements, including distancing practices of faculty; and the impact of School facilities. In the following subsections I present a discussion of those five sets of barriers.

Figure 8.2 School-related barriers to completion as perceived by faculty members

Source: Elaborated by author

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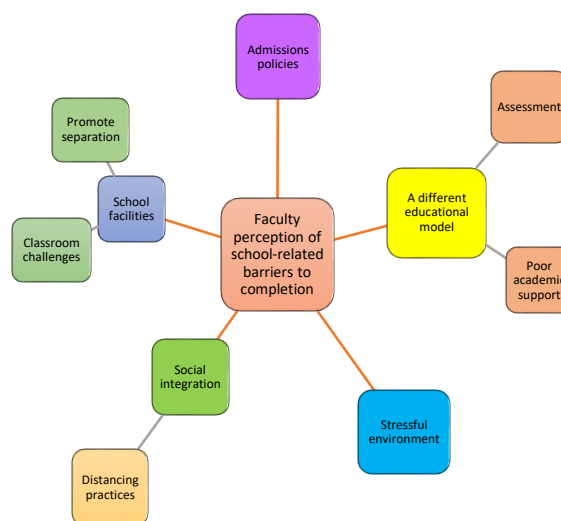
8.2.1 Admissions policies

A mass higher education system means for public universities the pressure to raise the cap on student numbers. The admission process at the UANL represents a challenge to a School that aims at selectivity to recruit students to match the skills and attitudes required to succeed in a differentiated course, compared to other options within the same university. Faculty members suggest the pressure to raise student numbers has resulted in the admission of students who are not prepared to succeed in a course of academic elitism, hence the root of the problem is perceived to be in the admission policies, and not in the practices within the School:

> *We have never been able to convince them we can't make a better match between numbers of enrolment and graduates… it sends the signal of being a university that does not understand how to transform those young students… that's a problem the Vice-Chancellor's office will always have. (FM, 18, tutor, alumni)*

The displacement of the School as a unit that does not align with policies of expansion makes the problem of misaligned profiles an external one. The efforts are focused on generating changes in the admission policy in order to admit better-fit students, and not on changing pedagogical practices and other elements of the School *doxa* in order to improve the opportunities of disadvantaged students. Additionally, the normalisation of dropout in the field of economics is identified as a factor that determines how academics perceive this phenomenon:

> *I don't know how much of a problem dropout is, if I am not mistaken, dropout figures here are very similar to figures in other schools of economics in the country, and the other issue is that as a public University we are subject to expand our coverage, even when we know students don't have what is required to survive the first year. (FM09, tutor, alumni)*

Faculty members who are in decision-making positions report attempts to modify the process to improve selectivity, but those efforts are limited by institutional policies that are also subject to the dynamics of the expansion process of higher education. The student body admitted at the School of Economics is changing, but the attitude of academics is one that resists moving towards a system that promotes opportunities for students from disadvantaged academic backgrounds, who also have limited time and financial resources to be invested in their education.

Astin (1999) highlights the importance of the institutional environment in promoting changes in both social and academic behaviours expected to promote student persistence, but evidence in this study identifies the risk of dropout is perpetuated by the institution in terms of the limited action taken to promote changes, as that transformation is perceived as detrimental to the elitist nature of the course. This situation reinforces the idea that a prompt change in students' attitude is needed to succeed in this educational context:

> *They should feel they are a different kind of student, another level is required, they*
> *will be educated in a different way, that is a mind-set they have to change, if they do*
> *not change by the second semester, they are not in the right place. Now, what to*
> *do? We are always limited by economic resources, and we, the academic staff, are*
> *already immerse in too many things. (FM13, former tutor, not-alumni)*

Lecturers do not identify themselves as agents of change in facilitating that transition, in fact there is a feeling of being overloaded with activities on top of teaching that would not allow them to meet new expectations set by the needs of a more diverse student body. The result is a trap that fails to solve the marginalisation of disadvantaged students, and the culture of the School is not challenged. The status quo is legitimate and supported by the dominating group, economists. Because admission policies represent an element perceived as beyond the control of the School, faculty members see this as an unavoidable situation of high risk for less-prepared students, pushing them to eventually, and *inevitably*, leave the

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course. Dropout is perceived as a positive contribution from academics to students, who see in leaving early an adjustment that could save students time and effort:

> *In in some way we are helping them make an early decision, whether this is what they want or if this is something they are able to do or not. (FM03, tutor, alumni)*

The condescending tone of these words evidence how the dominating groups attempt to minimise the violent outcomes of their practices of marginalisation and non-inclusion, it is legitimate to do so because as gatekeepers it is their responsibility to make sure membership is granted to those with the talent and resources needed to develop the *academic capital* that characterises students in a subject area that leads to position of power and prestige.

8.2.2 A different educational model

Assessment

The School of Economics is a school with good students who get poor marks. These are the words of a faculty member who succinctly illustrates an ethos that sets rigour in assessment as a priority within the academic experience. Identifying as the *executioners* is a role that denotes the *duty* of carrying out a sentence not decided by lecturers themselves, but by a range of factors that include inefficient admission policies, limited capacity to expand to the expectation of a mass system, and prior preparation misaligned with the educational model of the School. Academics who fiercely defend academic elitism show a strong position to defend the idea that expansion is not a desirable goal in this segment of higher education. This ambivalence reflects the socially constructed contradictions students experience and the paradox of initial admission with intentional selectivity afterwards:

> *(…) we are the executioners, we say who can't make it, students leave in one or two semesters, or in two years, it is our job to do that and it's painful, we know it's the*

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future of these young boys and girls, but that's no reason to relax our academic

standards, we have to continue as it has been historically, a model that gives results,

very few very well-prepared graduates. (FM17, tutor, non-alumni)

The practices of the School benefit some student groups more than others, and the

School itself is immerse in an effort to maintain its position within a wider system that is

imposing policies that contradict the principles of an institution of elite. Lecturers are aware

of the implications of those low marks for students' transition to the labour market and the

impact they have on students' self-concept, as one of the lecturers illustrates:

We send them to the labour market with low marks and a very negative attitude,

defeated, we fabricate losers. (FM02, non-tutor, alumni)

However, academics with a consolidated position of power within the School refer to

a role they play in keeping a tradition that puts assessment as a central element in the

academic experience, not as a pedagogical tools but as a mechanism of meritocracy and

selectivity. The identity of elite is behind the mission of the School to *produce* qualified

students for selective jobs, and to this end, academic competence is fundamental. Lecturers

as keepers of that tradition have the power to decide how to discriminate those able to

climb the ladder:

You have to keep certain tradition, it's not about failing people, it's about the

homogenisation of exams, it's a ladder the student has to climb, and another thing

about this school is that the student is the one who will pass, they are used to

getting a pass but students here are the ones who have to pass, lecturers do not feel

guilty because students fail. (FM19, former tutor, non-alumni)

Two contrastive positions can be identified on assessment. On the one hand, those

lecturers who prioritise assessment as a mechanism of selectivity; on the other hand,

lecturers who use assessment as an instrument to guide and inform their teaching and to

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identify learning opportunities to redirect students' academic work. The latter group is characterised by lecturers who show an interest in approaching students and prioritise integration and support in the development of skills that will promote learning. For those lecturers, the assessment practices observed in School come across as unfair and unnecessary, and an emphasis is placed on the importance of learning over testing:

> *What they haven't realised is they can be the best school in the universe without failing all students, what matters is they learn, you have 120 and I don't mean 120 will graduate, but the student will know he had the opportunity, he was well treated, the way they are assessed speaks badly of the lecturer, are you not ashamed that only 10% of your students pass and the rest fail? I don't get that (…) those students who survive feel they are wow, and then start thinking it's all right, the Stockholm syndrome. (FM17, non-tutor, non-alumni)*

The observation of students experiencing a *Stockholm syndrome* illustrates the internalisation of a doxa that accepts poor assessment practices, and the authority of lecturers, earned through academic capital, validates this scenario as something that comes natural to the subject area.

The movement towards a *mass production* in higher education works under the assumption that the inclusion of a greater proportion of non-traditional students would be accompanied by adjustments to better meet the needs of the new student population, but the context of academic elitism in a mass system under study seems to have applied a *sink or swim mentality* in which assessments and exams have become a way of ranking and selecting students in an environment that still focuses heavily on academics as the source of knowledge, in a context where knowledge is power.

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The need for full-time enrolment

The full-time requirement expects students to spend an average of eight hours daily at school, plus the time needed to do their readings and coursework assignment. In the words of a senior lecturer, 'the school is definitely not designed for people who need to make a living.' This feature represents another element of selectivity and elitism set by the educational model of the School. It has been discussed how first-generation students, who tend to come from a low socioeconomic background, find the high demand of time to be a barrier to their permanence. Faculty members report an awareness of the disadvantage this represents for less-privileged students, and perceive this as a problem of a magnitude that exceeds the capacity of the institution.

> *This is a serious structural, economic and political problem. It cannot be solved with good will or the support of just a few. (FM15, non-tutor, non-alumni)*

The expectations of academic workload set by the School go beyond what the university authorities would consider as reasonable to demand from 'a university student', yet no regulations are applied and the demand is set to a level that is difficult to meet for students with work or caring responsibilities. An experience shared by a lecturer serves as evidence to triangulate this perception with that of members of the higher academic commission, an academic body comprised by professors from different schools, whose role includes the approval of modules and changes in the curriculum for courses at the UANL:

> *I was sent to explain to the higher academic commission what my course was about, they were top members of the academic council at the university, and they told me we were exaggerating, they wondered how we could expect students to read one book per week, and they said a university student wouldn't be able to do it. I told them 'this is what we have always done in this school' and they said it was too much. (FM17, non-tutor, non-alumni)*

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This example illustrates dispositions expected, and how the curriculum followed by other schools within the same university does not share the standards of academic elitism. The fact that the School is able to renegotiate the curriculum and impose a different content of modules with a perceived *superiority* in terms of rigour and demand in comparison to the rest of the institution, legitimises practices of *symbolic violence* that reaffirm the domination of the group in power. The source of the *hysteresis* observed is the *non-written permission* to perpetuate practices that divert from expansion and move towards the pursuit of academic prestige.

The requirement of a full time enrolment, not in terms of the hours spent at School, but how a student is expected to prioritise academic activities over any other activities in their lives, is an imposition that oversees the disruptive nature of this practice on students' lives:

> *They don't have a clear understanding this is a full-time school, this kind of situation could be solved by giving them a good panorama of what is expected from a good student, to be a full-time student, immerse in their studies, they will have to sacrifice personal activities, or make it clear to their family they won't be able to participate in the activities they have been involved into, they would say they did the same in high-school and did well in school, but it won't be the same here, that's where the disconnect comes. (FM13, former tutor, non-alumni).*

Saying *it won't be the same here* makes a salient point on how academics perceive the School as different to others, the fact that the familial *doxa* is misaligned with the *doxa* of the School is a known scenario of implications to the student. The key role of economic resources and *cultural capital* in the family is a defining element to be able to meet the full time requirement of the School, and the expectations of *sacrifice* have a different meaning. Students are expected to internalise the cost of that separation process, and it is expected that families will be able to process the change, a scenario that is far from reality.

Learn to think like an economist

Academics emphasise the gap between learning strategies known to students compared to those required in the study of economics. Memorisation based learning needs to be replaced by problem solving and the development of analytical tools, and intuition. The teaching of economics is known to focus its efforts on one particular goal, "to teach the student to think like an economist" (Colander, 1991, p. 227), a vision shared by academics in this study. In order to achieve that goal, lecturers encourage students to move away from memorisation, develop study habits, and use analytical and critical tools. All this discourse comes with the assumption that students have an *academic and linguistic capital* to be able to internalise the advice and put it into practice.

> *This is a science that requires intuition, to solve problems with the tools given… we only teach two things here, to think like an economist in order to have an analytical way of seeing the world… and to get used to work under pressure… to a great extent the success of economists is that they don't pop like kernels under pressure. (FM07, former tutor, alumni)*

This helps round the idea shared by students that in order to pass exams they have to understand how the teacher thinks. This implies a deep change in study strategies and skills that is implicit, not explicit in the teaching practices at School. *Academic capital* needs to be developed under the definition of what is valuable knowledge and skill for this context, as lecturers emphasise students need to see the theory applied in the real world. Lecturers expect to see this transformation in the time of their module, without considering the time it takes to develop the ability to *think like an economist* depends not only on effort, but on the *cultural capital* students bring to university.

Evidence shows lecturers' awareness of their limited pedagogic practices with regards to guiding students on how to develop this skill. The opportunity to succeed in

becoming an economist is perceived by lecturers as an individual interest, and an individual quest:

> *I try to be empathetic with students, and many of them fail, but I also have that horrible way of thinking of every man for himself, and there goes the problem (…) that skill [to think like an economist] cannot be developed, but you're not stupid, perhaps it's not your strength, and I give them my apologies for not being able to help them develop it, I think having that skill is the most important element to succeed here. (FM07, former tutor, alumni)*

Academic success linked to a form of innate skill reduces the role academics see in themselves in the formation of economists, they cannot teach it, they can only help students unveil it. This requirement goes beyond the individual effort to shape the development of skills and knowledge, what academic elitism requires is more than individual work, it takes natural talent waiting to be discovered. The process to overcome the disadvantage of a *lack of talent* is individual, the realisation of what to do is personal, and lecturers are there to teach those who have an *innate* ability to succeed in this context. This discourse of cleverness and the concept of the deserving and undeserving student are salient components of the competitive environment promoted in the school, and are part of the process that students deal with when deciding whether to leave or stay on the course.

The perspective of academic integration presented above can be associated with what literature refers to as a neoliberal political philosophy in education (Radice, 2013), where competition amongst individuals is a way to incentive individuals to maximize their own personal benefit and progress, and to those elements we add the need for a natural feel for the area of study.

8.2.3 Stressful environment

Students go through processes of personal growth and development in the years spent in university, and in this regard, the institutional environment has a significant influence. Literature on the effect of stress among students in higher education emphasises the key role that institutions play in providing adequate resources to help students deal with stress, and particular attention is suggested to be paid to this area, as stress is perceived as a weakness and many students tend to suffer it in silence, experienced as a source of shame (Robotham & Julian, 2006). Faculty members identify a discourse that fosters stress and anxiety among students, particularly in the transition stage. The awareness of the need to help students overcome issues that emerge from working under a stressful environment is identified, and a gap in their pedagogic skills and knowledge to address this issue is noted:

> *(…) particularly female students, for some reason they get nervous in maths, their mind is blocked and it was frustrating, am I to give them a passing grade if I know they know but when they are pointed with a torch their minds go blank? Am I doing her a favour if I give her a passing mark? They have a problem facing exams, somebody has to help them stop that anxiety and those things, but there is nobody… I don't think a lecturer here can do that, because we don't know how to, we're no experts in that field. (FM18, tutor, alumni)*

The limited preparation of academics in approaching pedagogic issues related to study skills shows how teaching the less-prepared students is not perceived as a role that lecturers are ready to undertake. The observation of this issue occurring more often among female students takes us back the experience of *leavers* and *students in progression* who reported the challenges of proving themselves in a male dominated subject area.

Stress related to assessment is identified in literature as a risk of poor academic performance, and students able to regulate those emotions tend to be more successful in higher education (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003). It has been discussed how the assessment

practices in the context of this study generate an environment of stress that is new to students who have a prior academic experience of success. Lecturers identify a *doxa* that normalises stress but identifies it to be within acceptable standards:

> *I think we don't face the level of demand and stress that students deal with in other countries, like South Korea, where students commit suicide and those are real dramas... I believe we have generated a discourse that exaggerates the difficulty of the course and indulges failure. (FM05, tutor, alumni)*

Academics set a comparison to an extreme in the context of a highly competitive nation that does not share similar conditions as the ones faced by students in this School. The *drama* of the local student is reduced, and academics reveal the culture of the School is not bounded to the expected development of an average students in the local context, but moves to a global scenario that compares students under a culture of extreme competence, as it is the case of South Korea. The globalised scenario used as reference by academics is aligned with the *academic capital* they bring to academic elitism, with their own experiences set in international institution of higher education abroad. The standard known to students is limited to other courses in the same university, or other higher education institutions within the country. The misalignment is significant, and because these references tend to be invisible to students, it becomes harder for academics and students to come to an agreement of what it means to deal with stress in rigorous academic contexts.

The notion of indulging failure legitimises the way the course is experienced, but the position implied in this discourse is one that calls for changes in how failure should be perceived and not so much on how it could be resolved. The debate is on how students should work harder to avoid failure, and not so much on how the School can contribute to reduce failure.

Poor support provision

Literature on course completion in higher education highlights the importance of the provision of student support, particularly amongst less privileged students and those from non-traditional backgrounds (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Seidman, 2012). In the discourse of academics, there is no discussion of the need to provide student with support or guidance beyond the propaedeutic sessions at the start of the course. The strategy is to encourage students to work on their own as an approach to academic development:

> *I always tell them to spend time thinking, on their own, that's another problem of economists, not knowing how to work in teams, but I don't think that's a deep-rooted problem that can be solved, we make them that way, very individualistic. (FM07, former tutor, alumni).*

This culture of individualism promoted among students in this context contrast recommendations in the literature on student retention, which emphasise the importance of learning communities to promote both academic progression and a sense of belonging. By adopting an individualistic approach, the institution has limited accountability for promoting retention or building a sense of community, and students' need for support is approached through the discourse of *'echarle ganas'*:

> *Students here are told probably the dumbest piece of advice I've ever heard: 'échale ganas'… You don't tell a person, 'go and study, figure it out'. They're not going to figure it out, you need to tell them how to do it. (FM17, tutor, non-alumni)*

Warren (2002) discusses three ways of organising academic support in higher education. Separate support, which takes place outside the classroom and is directed at the development of specific skills identified to have a functional application to studies or for future incorporation in the labour market; semi-integrated initiatives, which have the

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purpose of transforming and developing students as part of their advancement in the course; and integrated interventions, which put development at the core of the learning experience. The signposted practice in School aimed at student support is based on a form of semi-integrated initiative through the teaching role taken by students of higher semesters who serve as bridging strategy between new students and the *doxa*:

> *It is the institution who provides the support needed, and by institution I mean peers, it's the environment in school… they discuss doubts, particularly in the first year, if laboratorios work well students will be in touch with peers clarifying doubts, telling jokes, if that doesn't work then lecturers will [clarify doubts], I hope laboratorios are working fine. (FM19, former tutor, non-alumni)*

In giving *laboratorista*s this important job, academics endorse a culture of distancing, an element that becomes salient in the student experience and that determines the limited interaction with academics. This element is discussed in detail in the following subsection.

8.2.4 Social integration: distancing practices

Literature on retention and dropout highlights the importance of both academic and social integration to lead to greater commitment to the institution and graduation (Bean, 1983). The theory developed by Tinto (1975, 1993) proposes that sources of student departure are found in three areas: failure to meet academic requirements; failure to socially integrate in the culture of the institution; and a low level of commitment to the institution. Lecturers' accounts summarise the difficulties presented to students to meet academic requirements in this School, and social integration tends to be hindered by promoting individualistic practices.

Social integration is measured in terms of peer -to -peer interactions and faculty-student interactions. Research based recommendations focus on the need to generate

opportunities for extracurricular activities and informal student-students and faculty-student interactions (Long, 2012). Pascarella (1980) observes that contact between students and faculty is positively related to learning outcomes, and Thomas (2012) emphasises the need to promote supportive and meaningful interaction between peers and faculty members as a way to nurture a culture of belonging that helps promote student retention and success in higher education. In that regard, lecturers expressed an awareness of student support gap, particularly in the transition period observed in the first year. However, when referring to the pastoral care programme as a source of guidance and support, evidence makes it clear that the programme remains a theory not transferred to practice:

> *The tutorial programme is supposed to accompany students in the transition, but we are economists… I tried to put myself in their shoes, I think I got along with them because I was empathic, I would say 'I do understand you, it's tough'… you have to be not too old in age or in your mind to make it work. (FM18, tutor, alumni)*

and:

> *There are many institutional programmes we don't agree with, but because they are institutional we have to implement them… if I did the training now and understood pastoral care better, beyond what my intuition tells me, it would be better (FM17, tutor, non-alumni)*

Research on widening participation in higher education suggests the new diversified profile of the university student calls for interventions to facilitate the transition process. In literature, the use of peer-support is an observed policy that aims at supporting new students' social and academic integration (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Topping, 1996) under the idea that peers can show greater levels of empathy with newcomers and will be able to share experiences, behaviours and strategies that worked for them in their own integration process.

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Academics expect students to go to their peers as their first source of reference, a strategy that students reported as their prefer choice, due to the levels of anxiety experienced in approaching lecturers, as discussed in previous chapters. Academics express an understanding of the need to approach students in an empathic way, yet there is deep meaning in saying '*we are economists.*' Academics make a statement that justifies why the role of tutors is not clear and not possible to everyone in this context. Moreover, the interest of lecturers in relation to students tends to be expressed in terms of academic achievement, not on wellbeing, and consequently spending time listening to how students struggle to adapt to their life as university students feels beyond the lecturer's expertise and beyond their expected role, even though the institutional responsibility to do something about it is acknowledged. Time and again, the argument presented by academics emphasises a negative attitude towards the evolution of their role and how it is pushing them to a position that takes them away from academic progression. The symbolic value of caring for students and their wellbeing in the context of academic elitism is too low to take a priority position in academics' activities. In a context where students are not a *client* but an individuals seeking to earn membership, academics focus their efforts on visual elements of professional performativity.

> *When I started working as a university lecturer my only job was to teach, then*
> *suddenly it was transformed and on top of that you have an administrative role,*
> *then you have to do research, we make progress and some things are neglected,*
> *right?, I think the institution should pay attention to that and rescue students that*
> *can be rescued. (FM13, former tutor, non-alumni)*

Expectations on the activities conducted by academics have intensified in the last decades. Ogbonna and Harris (2004) found that derived from high expectation in taking over activities that require emotional labour, many lecturers end up feeling depleted to the extent that it becomes difficult to evoke a genuine caring response. Faculty members in the

context of this study pass the role of pastoral caring to peers, and this allows lecturers to focus on their own performativity. In the process, distancing practices are experienced by students as a process of isolation that generates negative emotions in detriment of the intention to persist.

Bourdieu, Passeron, and de Saint Martin (1994) refer to the process of 'distancing' as reciprocal: condoned by the students themselves as a defence mechanism against what they don't know and against being exposed in front of others. The practice of support through peer-teaching extends the image of lecturers as being out of reach, going back to the figure of *lecturers like gods* introduced by both *leavers* and *students in progression,* a form of internalised distancing between faculty and students that contributes to building a barrier for the development of a sense of belonging and gaining membership of the group, as discussed earlier in this study.

It has been discussed in previous chapters how students experience shyness and difficulties in approaching lecturers. Research suggests student personality plays an important role in this dynamic (Crozier, 1997), but additional to the elements students and faculty bring into this (lack of) interaction, a more subtle feature linked to the layout of facilities of the school further promotes this distancing practice.

> *(…) there is a crystal door that separates the noise and hustle of students from the environment of academics, a space of research where academics think, meditate and create, there is a sort of separation between student and faculty, because the environment of the School is designed that way… there is still an actual crystal door, and an invisible one students do not dare to cross, maybe because they feel inferior, partially because that exposes their ignorance and only the daring ones would venture to open that door (FM08, non-tutor, alumni).*

and:

The fact that faculty has a separate bathroom from students, we have a separate parking lot, and we don't even have meritocratic separation, I think it's a very subtle thing… the architecture here, the attitude we have, it probably affects students in ways we are not aware of, it does affect them. (FM11, tutor, non-alumni)

Separation is observed throughout the building, and the differentiation sends a signal of hierarchy and power that prevents students and academic staff from generating interactions outside the classroom. The insistence in drawing a line between academics and students may be understood as a cultural trait, an idea of respect based on the concept of distance, particularly regarding relations with others who have a position of authority. The observation of this respect-distance behaviour is embedded in the Latin-American culture, where language offers a distinctive way of addressing others in a formal way – *usted* - and informal - *tú* -, and it sets a reference of separation accepted and perpetuated by academics and students:

The first thing you would have to demonstrate to my colleagues is that, ok, if you are approachable people won't lose respect for you, if you are approachable people will walk up to you and talk about their problems. (FM11, tutor, non-alumni)

In this context, respect is a form of power lecturers gain with their position, and the practice observed to keep that power is a practice of *symbolic violence* that promotes marginalisation. Academics distancing practices are based mainly on the notion that a caring role is less prestigious than investing their time in academic pursuits, but there is an additional risk in promoting engagement in student-teacher interactions. Because academics tend to favour interacting with students who already share the desired profile of a member of the community, and those students tend to be more confident in approaching lecturers, an inequality of treatment can be worsen the disadvantaged positon of less-prepared students.

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Part of the discourse of academic excellence and self-perception as keepers of a tradition of high academic rigour serves as guidance on how lecturers are expected to behave and perform their role, as observed in the following comment from a senior lecturer:

> *Remember it all starts in the origin, 'childhood is destiny', and the founder of this school, well, she is deified, and that's where problems emerge. Academics here are like gods, but you have to take risks, show yourself to students as a human, with errors, shadows, you have to learn to be a full human being… there is a lack of capacity to open up to otherness, which is postmodernity, opening to what is different, to what questions you, that's why postmodernity is so insecure, I think it worries them too much. (FM17, non-tutor, non-alumni)*

Separation is based on elements of superiority, the power of knowledge held by faculty members represents a barrier to students in the sense that it prevents interaction with lecturers, and that works to the detriment of active learning opportunities. The argument I bring forward is not against the idea of academic prestige, but an argument that questions the building of prestige through practices of *symbolic violence* particularly towards those who have the disadvantage of not being familiar with the values, knowledge and capital of relevant symbolic value to succeed in academic elitism. In the experience of *persisters* discussed in Chapter Six, I identified how approaching lecturers was a changing experience that helped students in their efforts to complete the course. Faculty members also report the positive contribution of interacting with students to share valuable academic advice that promotes academic success. The evidence found in both experiences illustrates the benefits of student-faculty interactions, as suggested in the literature, and it calls for the need to consider changes in School practices and promote a transformation of academic and cognitive skills in the early stages. For this to happen, student will need to perceive faculty members as approachable and caring, and lose their fear of showing themselves as

ignorant. Similarly, changes in academics' attitudes would be necessary to change to a mind-set that emphasises the value of student-faculty contact at the early stages in the course, in a context where separation is embedded in the notion of respect and prestige, and the value of mingling with students is almost non-existing for academics who perceive themselves in a position of superiority where *academic capital* determines the value of individuals and what they have to contribute to interactions.

8.3 Student-related barriers

As it was discussed in Chapter Six, there are student-related elements that help understand the process students experience at School affecting their intentions and opportunities to stay. In this section I discuss the perception of faculty members have on two attributes they perceive as fundamental to stay and complete the course: effort and perseverance despite setbacks. The Input-Environment-Output model (Astin, 1993) postulates that effort can be understood in terms of the involvement students develop in academic experience, and the level of effort students bring into their studies is linked to the interaction with the environment of the school, hence the importance of having an environment that is nurturing and encouraging.

Experiencing academic adversity at the School of Economics is an everyday life issue. Academic assessment is very different from what was known to students and progressing in the course implies deep changes in the way students have to approach learning. The constant negative academic experiences reported by students deplete confidence in their capability to overcome academic setback, leading to cases of intentions to leave. Faculty members perceive students leave because they are not willing to make the effort demanded by the course. They report students feel easily defeated by academic failure allegedly because it requires changes they are not willing to undertake, since *becoming an economist* requires deep changes in their mind-set, such as accepting failure as an *opportunity to learn*,

and the development of an authentic interest for economics that transforms into determination to progress in the course.

8.3.1 Lack of effort

The idea that students do not succeed at the School of Economics because they do not have the ethos of effort towards academic activities is found among lecturers. Students are perceived as not willing to make an effort to learn and become active learners engaged in the learning process. Faculty members report feeling troubled to learn many students are *satisfied* with passing a module in a second or third opportunity instead of working harder to pass in the first opportunity. A lecturer suggests this has become a way of experiencing being a student in a way that does not observe the culture of academic elitism and rigour:

> *I think students who are willing and interested, those who want to pass their*
> *modules and dedicate time to study, can make it, and failing becomes just an*
> *accident that could happen to anyone on a given situation, but when one interprets*
> *it as a habit, as something accepted and ok, something that does not worry me, it*
> *basically becomes a way of doing the degree without much stress and without*
> *making a great effort. (FM05, tutor, alumni)*

Faculty members perceive resitting modules as a strategy students apply to reduce levels of stress and effort. This idea is not identified in the discourse of students, who report experiencing high levels of stress, and even the risk of dropping out when failing modules. Lecturers' perception of academic adversity is a concept that is informed by personal experience and from a perspective of the dominant culture that is *natural* to the *habitus* of the School. Some academics report they never failed modules and identify their full dedication to their studies as a strategy to obtain those results, the misalignment helps understand, although not justify, the low levels of faculty empathy reported by students,

and the low involvement of academics in promoting explicitly student development beyond *échale ganas*.

Students who do not show values and behaviours of symbolic value to lecturers are classified as outsiders, and their permanence cannot be promoted in the eyes of the keepers of a tradition of rigour that identifies with characteristics not observed in those students. Other academics relate to their experience as PhD students and the academic setbacks they experienced contribute to generate empathy and replace elements of talent and natural skill by elements of effort, but this does not come in the early transition stages, but later on in the progression, after students have failed, shown determination to stay, and are *ready to be tutored*:

> *It's not a matter of intelligence but skills and study strategies, this is something students lack and I'm aware of that, I have been in their shoes, how you end up feeling exhausted after studying and failing… we talk about study strategies, how to organise their time, but I usually do this with students who are in the fifth or sixth opportunity, they are the ones who contact you and I feel I can help with my advice. (FM07, former tutor, alumni)*

The benefits of informal interactions between students and faculty identified by Pascarella (1980) to foster conditions for course completion are delayed until students prove they are ready. Students who persist in their attempt to stay show a level of effort that academics identify as a valuable asset, and the investment of their time in promoting academic development in those students becomes an effort with a valuable return. Faculty's perception implies students in the early stages of the course are not ready to internalise the advice they have to offer.

A piece of evidence used to identify students are not ready for this exchange is observed in how students are distracted in class. The use of technology is also associated by academics as an issue of risk and an element that discourages students from making an

effort to develop study skills. Additionally, it represents a distractor in the classroom for both students and faculty. The growing use of mobile phones in class is subject of interest for researchers in education and a source of concern regarding levels of engagement in class and academic misbehaviour (Campbell, 2006). Academics report the detrimental effect on note taking efforts and on the involvement students exhibit in class, and express a frustration in the misalignment of priority set by students:

> *They show no respect, they take pictures of the board instead of taking notes, it's best to take notes, it takes more work but it helps understand better, it implies more effort, but nothing in life is easy. I ban the use of mobiles in class, it distracts me, when I see them use them I say, 'if you want you can leave'… I am not here to contemplate them. I pay attention to them, I explain the models, I value my time and it should be valued by them too. (FM03, tutor, alumni)*

Technology as a source of distraction is a direct competitor for students' attention. The use of mobiles in the classroom, beyond the disrespectful nature it has towards the lecturer and classmates, represents a challenge in the development of fundamental academic skills and a source of disengagement with studies. *Students in progression* report an awareness of the risk mobiles represent to their studies, and this is a growing area of concern for faculty members who find themselves now in the need to compete for students' attention in class.

8.3.2 Grit (Resilience and commitment)

It has been stated that students who come to this School tend to have a history of success in their prior experiences. Faculty members emphasise the importance of internalising *academic adversity* as a norm explained not as a negative trait of the course, but as a consequence of the misalignment of prior education experiences and the

educational model used in the teaching of economics. In order to persists, academics assert students need what Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly define as grit: "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. The concept of grit means working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus" (2007, p.1087).

In Chapters Six and Seven, it was identified how persistence, effort and resilience worked together to help *persisters* and *students in progression* in attaining the goal of graduating and staying in the course respectively. It was also discussed how the imposition of the *academic capital* that holds symbolic value in the area of study makes students experience the loss of their self-concept as individuals able to achieve, and how the *doxa* that promotes high levels of engagement and effort in exchange of low marks represents a high risk of non-completion in the context of this study. Tinto (1975, 1993) identifies commitment to the goal is an element that impacts the intention to persist, but what academics expect students to produce is an ability to overcome constant setbacks implied in the process of reaching a goal. In the context of the School of Economics, students and not the institution are the ones who have to work towards the transformation. This change, different from what is suggested by the sociological models of retention, it is not a process that responds to the interest of becoming part of a group, but an individual process of change in order to fit into a system.

The personal goal of becoming an economist sets academic standards that have to be met under conditions of inequality and non-inclusion of students who come, right from the start, with an important gap in the knowledge and skills to develop *academic capital* to succeed in academic elitism. Academics and students identify a discourse of expectations of academic adversity and students illustrate the negative impact of experiencing higher education in an environment of high levels of anxiety and stress. In this regard, what faculty members emphasise as necessary not only to work hard towards a goal, but to internalise

necessary changes and be prepared to accept constant setbacks as part of the process of transformation:

> *It's like when you move to England, you have to make deep changes, it's a different level and you adapt. Students who leave the course have this type of problem, or they are really smart and they fail exams and they don't want to be failing again and they realise this is a School where people fail, or maybe they have too many problems they perceive impossible to overcome. (FM19, former tutor, non-alumni)*

What faculty members identify students need to succeed is the outcome of an internal process. For students to persist it takes a passion for the science of economics, perseverance, hard work ethos and an open disposition for change and develop cognitive and academic skills, a transformation academics perceive as implicit to become an economist. *Persisters* identify in themselves the traits described by lecturers, but the element that remains marginal in the discussion of dropout under conditions of academic elitism is the commitment of the institution to support students development, to internalise some of the costs in the efforts to produce highly qualified professionals and invest on the efforts to help students develop their capabilities.

8.4 Home-related barriers

In the barriers related to family, I find two element observed by academics in this study. The financial issues at home that require students to contribute to the family income, and the mismatch between familial and school *habitus* represents a barrier academics expect students to overcome by facing family and transferring to family the expected norms of the School that differ from what is known at home. Academics identify students incur in emotional costs in this process, but they see it as part of the necessary growth expected to take place in the transition into higher education and into adult life.

8.4.1 Parents' expectations of academic rigour

In the context of my study, I observe academics take for granted key knowledge that students' families do not have, particularly information of relevance to understand the values of the dominant group. Although some parents have attended higher education, their limited understanding of the implications of a course of rigour weakens the advantages derived from coming from a household with at least a parent with a higher education qualification.

A faculty member shared his experience after an encounter with the father of a student who was struggling in the course. The student's father had graduated from the same university, but from a different area of study, and was not able to understand why his son, despite the many hours dedicated to studies, would struggle to the point of being forced to stop after failing a module in the fourth opportunity. After explaining the nature of the assessment in the school and the normalisation of low marks and high frequency of academic failure, that father left with a greater understanding of what his son was facing:

> *I spent about an hour chatting with him and he left with a better awareness, he said 'it's so good you told me all this, I had a different idea, I thought it was a school with normal evaluations'… There is an abyss between what parents think they know about this school and the reality. (FM17, non-tutor, non-alumni)*

The gap leaves students with the difficult task of *educating their families* into the *habitus* of the School. This can prove to be a daunting task when parents' knowledge of their children's prior academic performance tells them they are capable of succeeding.

There is a range of attitudes regarding parents' influence identified among academics. Faculty members involved in high academic performativity activities tend to make reference to the needs students have to spend time re-educating their families, whereas lecturers who

give value to pastoral and personal mentoring activities see this information process as a responsibility of both the student and the institution, hence their attitude reflects a greater involvement and agency in generating a change in this regard.

In processing this information from their personal experience, lecturers tend to fail to capture the experience not only of the first-generation student, whose family has no prior experience in higher education at all, but the experience of many other students whose parents fail to get the full-picture of what it means to be a student in this context. Some lecturers see the effects of parents' lack of understanding as related to problems at home and the stress caused by those events which have an impact of students' experience. The assumption that parents and students should know the implications of academic rigour construct a fallacy of the impact of parents' level of education on students' readiness to go to university:

> *There are many walking dead here, because they are smart they don't want to tell*
>
> *their parents and friends, to admit they are not doing well, there have been cases of*
>
> *students who lie at home, for years, because all your life you have been told you're*
>
> *really good and suddenly you're here and, what's going on? (FM20,tutor, alumni)*

Academics observe there is a limited understanding of parents about the rigour of the school, and students experience shame in not meeting the expectations parents have on them. The process of change experienced in School takes students to lose the image they had at home, and find themselves on their own, unable to find understanding in their family, hiding as a strategy to stay afloat.

Literature suggests that students whose parents have experience in university can help their children navigate the higher education system, this context illustrates how the aspect of elitism and academic rigour are out of the gasp of parents, and parents '*cultural capital* is not sufficient to accompany students in their integration to academic elitism. However, the idea of keeping parents' involvement to a minimum is found in the context of

this study, where lecturers do not see room or need to involve parents in the School, since students are perceived as young independent adults, and the role of parents is expected to take place somewhere else, beyond the academic world:

> *I don't know how well-informed parents are, but being a parent is a responsibility that corresponds only to them, and there's no reason why universities should deal with another burden. (FM15, non-tutor, non-alumni)*

Getting academics interested in taking action regarding involving or informing parents of the characteristics of the institutional *habitus* is notoriously difficult. Their perception of the extent to which the university and academics should go regarding interaction with parents or carers sets the boundaries, and no distinction is made when low parental involvement is not necessarily a sign of parents being less concerned or interested in the education of their children, but a possible sign of parents lacking the knowledge of what to expect when going to university, and particularly a highly demanding school.

8.4.2 Misalignment of the familial habitus and school habitus

In a study of first year college students, Terenzini et al. (1994) found that the transition to higher education takes pull and push forces from different sources, including family, interpersonal, academic and institutional forces, all interacting to shape the transition and learning experience. In their study, for students with at least one parent who has been to university, the decision to go to university is one fed by the educational attainment of parents and family, but for first-generation students, it represents a change in the family tradition and it was found that students in those groups tend to have less encouragement from families. In the present study, evidence supports findings in the literature, and the following observation for a senior lecturer provides an example of how families promote environments linked to non-completion risk situations for first-generation students:

Students actually have to work to help their family, or their family keeps getting in

the way in very annoying manners, relatives live an entirely different lifestyle, not

really compatible with someone who is a full-time student here, they're always

partying, or always getting into little jams, and no, they're not very serious

problems, but she feels obligated to help them and that takes time away from

studying. (FM11, tutor, non-alumni)

Plageman and Sabina (2010) suggest that family can represent a valuable support toward academic goals, an influence that is found to be associated to student persistence, but in the context of the present study, evidence shows family involvement with negative effects towards persistence. Students find themselves trapped between the familial *habitus*, defined by Reay as the "deeply ingrained system of perspectives, experiences and predispositions family members share" (1998, p. 527), and the institutional *habitus*, understood as `the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation' (Reay, David & Ball, 2001, para. 1.3). The difference between both confronts students with the dilemma of breaking with their family behaviours that clash with their institutional expected behaviours, a process that generates additional anxiety and conflict, both elements also related to non-completion in higher education.

Phelan, Davidson, and Cao (1991) suggest that the more difference there is between the norms, values, beliefs, expectations and actions of the school, the family, the peers and the self, the more conflict it is likely to cause in crossing from one environment to another, and schools tend not to see students in a holistic way, hence little is done to identify institutional structures that could facilitate crossing from one environment to another. It becomes evident that students are less likely to persist in the course unless they are engaged in the school life, and when the school life is heavily focused on academic performance, doing well in school becomes a fundamental element, together with the

importance and need to find a nourishing social group that shares the desired norms,

values, behaviours and expectations of the target environment, the School.

Evidence provided by faculty members illustrates the risk that the difference between

family and institutional *habitus* represents for students' persistence. The role that family can

play in the student decision to stay or leave the course and the impact of parents'

involvement is an area that requires further research in this context.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the perception of faculty members on the phenomenon of dropout in the context of a School of academic elitism within a context of mass higher education. Findings illustrate a commitment to academic rigour and academic performativity in the discourse of faculty members, and academic failure as part of a *doxa* strongly aimed at selectivity of the best-fit. The practices normalised at the School of Economics show a *hysteresis* from the system it belongs to, which aims at policies of expansion of higher education and opportunities for a less-privileged student population.

Faculty members perceive dropout as a necessary outcome that compensates the impossibility to apply a selectivity process that would favour the admission of better fit candidates who possess the *natural talent* required to successfully integrate into a community of academic elitism. In this regard, I identify two different positions held by academics in the context of academic elitism. On the one hand, there are academics who emphasise the need to keep the rigour of the School to promote quality of the outcome. Their objective is the homogenisation of students, and the successful students is expected to align to the level of *academic capital* characteristic of advantaged students. This practice is exercise under the notion that each individuals is responsible for their own progression. For those academics, it is accepted that the more naturally talented students have an advantage, and for other students it is merit and effort what it takes to succeed.

On the other hand, there are academics who acknowledge the importance of transformation of the practices in School in order to promote inclusion and better opportunities for success among unprivileged and less prepared students. Those academics tend to be in a lower hierarchy within the dominant group, and their lower status means their efforts to promote changes in School practices are not strong enough to foster change. Their position is subject to judgement from those in positions of power and influence within the context of the School, who suggest that allowing weaker candidates to gain their

membership in a community of academic elitism represents a risk to lose prestige and rigour in the field of economics.

The mission to close the gap in *academic capital* between students, the candidates to become members of the elite, and the faculty, the gatekeepers of a tradition of academic rigour and selectivity, is expected to be internalised by the students. The School *habitus* is non-negotiable and for those students who come with notable disadvantages either academic, economic or emotional, the risk of non-completion is eminent. There are no practices of inclusion or equality, the position of prestige and power of the School makes it possible to keep *symbolic violence* practices go unchallenged. Students are asked to meet requirements that would be unacceptable in other fields of study, and the policies that guide practices in other schools are not observed based on the argument of superiority in the curriculum and academic elite practices of the School.

Academics are aware of the position of privilege that students will gain in their future professional development if they gain a place in the field of economics, hence their determination in keeping traditions that reproduce the culture of the dominant groups. The discourse of a mass system of public higher education is misaligned with the discourse and practices of the teaching of economics, a field that leads to positions of power, and implicitly reproduce processes of selectivity that protect the interests of the dominant culture. The commitment to their role as the gatekeepers of a field of study of high importance and prestige in society legitimises, to the eyes of academics, the expected and normalised high dropout numbers in the context of academic elitism.

9. Conclusions

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study and summarises the findings of the research questions about the student experiences on the decision to stay or leave the course. Different from most research focused on the topic of dropout and persistence in higher education, this study explores the phenomenon within a context of academic elitism with a strong selectivity *doxa* but immerse in a system that aims at the expansion of access to higher education. In order to understand why students leave the course in this particular scenario, this study follows a phenomenological approach that uses the voices of students and their experiences, together with the perspective of academics involved in the student experience, in order to gain a rounded understanding of the issue. The findings reveal hidden reasons behind the apparent factors associated to the decision of leaving the course, and staying is explained through deep processes that are not evident and consequently not approached by the institution.

My motivation to conduct this research emerges from the alarming dropout rates I witnessed for years as an insider, first through my own experience as a student who left the same course, and secondly as a faculty member of the same School, observing with frustration how so many students left with a defeated attitude and how those who persisted suffered their student experience in silence and shame. After years being immerse in a *doxa* with a strong individualistic and meritocratic culture, the student struggle became a normativity to me as well, as I internalised the notion that *not everyone has what it takes* to succeed in a course of high rigour. This research responds to the need for action to approach a problem that has been unresolved for a long time and has become the *elephant in the room*

In literature, the *loss* associated to dropout is explained in terms of money and time invested in a project that was not achieved, and in the perspective of economics, the cost of

opportunity of not using resources in a project that could result in more valuable returns. However, my study illustrates a type of loss that reaches deeper layers. Students lose their self-concept of able and high-achieving individuals, they are hunted by a sense of failure and carry hidden injuries inflicted by practices that transmit a perception of inferiority and transfer the deficit to the individual. Even for those students who overcome barriers and persist, the feeling of individual deficit remains in invisible ways.

Dropout in the context of academic elitism serves the objective to maintain a status quo that reserves access to the gateway of positions of power and prestige to more advantaged or naturally deserving individuals. Observing such practices under a system with policies of expansion and inclusion reproduces the inequalities observed in society. This situation calls for actions to promote social justice in public higher education that generate real opportunities to succeed for disadvantaged students. Access to social mobility prospects under a discourse of meritocracy that requires more than effort to succeed is a *failure trap* and a false promise of access to social mobility.

The findings discussed in this study emerged from data obtained from in-depth interviews with a total of 65 participants divided in four groups: students who left the course before completion, referred to as '*leavers*' (12); students who completed the course, referred to as '*persisters*' (10); students currently enrolled in the course, referred to as '*students in progression*' (23); and faculty members (20) involved in teaching the undergraduate modules of the course under analysis.

This final chapter is organised in four sections. First, I present a summary of the findings of the study, followed by the strengths and limitations of this research and the discussion of implications for policy and practice. Finally, I make recommendations for future research on the study of barriers and facilitators to persistence in academic elitism in higher education.

The objective of this study is to gain a better understanding on the decision to stay or leave the course in the context of academic elitism in public higher education, particularly in the case of a programme with a high dropout rate. It was evident from the start, as I was conducting my literature review, that despite the similarities between the barriers identified in the literature and what I observed in the context of my study, there were important elements not shared that required attention to be paid to the specific characteristics of the context.

Why do students leave the course?

Similar to what is found in the literature on dropout and persistence in higher education, students in this study face barriers related to their prior academic experiences, school barriers, home barriers and personal barriers. An early decision to leave the course is identified among students who soon realise the subject area is not of their interest. Making an early decision for such reason is reported by participants as a positive decision. It can be expected that not all students make perfect choices, and leaving the course in order to enrol in a programme that aligns with the student's interest is a decision that benefits students.

Conversely, the case of students who have to leave the course because they do not have the financial resources to stay and additionally have to take the role of breadwinners, represents a negative experience accompanied by a feeling of frustration and unfairness. Financial hardship is worsen in a context that makes is difficult to access grants. The limited financial support available to students comes from local and federal authorities that require students to achieve high marks. This is a course in which better prepared and more privileged students can hardly achieve a pass, and low marks are legitimised under a discourse of high rigour, hence the opportunities for disadvantaged students to access grants and public funds that condition support to academic performativity are dramatically reduced. In an indirect way, the School practices exclude students from accessing

opportunities to obtain the limited financial support available. In order to stay, disadvantaged students have to find their own means, and that proves to be a challenge beyond their possibilities. The institutional discourse that claims no student should be left out for not having the economic resources to be in education does not reach this segment of higher education. Evidence in this study illustrates that opportunities to access elite education in a public university are not limited to merit, but in the words of one of the participants *it was always the money.*

A misalignment between home and School *doxa* is also identified as a factor that leads students to leave the course, but the impact of parents' experience in higher education or the lack of knowledge on the practices of higher education is not straightforward. Students report feeling a displacement between home and School. The support at home is generally positive, but when the differences between the practices and expectations at home and those at School cannot be settled, home becomes a barrier to persistence. Family gets in the way, and despite students' efforts to explain the demands of academic elitism, the result can be summarised in the phrase *it's like they don't care.*

The weight of being a first-generation student is aggravated when other siblings enter higher education and bring home better results with lower levels of effort. Parents who do not have information on the differences in the demands of academic elitism transfer the responsibility of failure to their children. For first-generation students, the urge to succeed is not only a personal achievement, but a family achievement which is highly threatened to become shame and embarrassment when students enter a context that normalises low achievement despite high levels of effort.

On the other hand, students whose parents have prior experience in higher education but not in academic elitism experience their transition into higher education under assumptions that prevent them from taking early actions to successfully integrate into the academic demands of the course, and parents miss the opportunity to offer their children

valuable guidance. As one of the lecturers illustrates it: *there is an abyss between what parents think they know about this school and the reality.*

Students come to their university experience with high expectations of the course, a self-concept of high achievement, the idea of becoming part of an outstanding group they initially identify with. The course offers a prospectus of high quality and prestige, hence disappointment in the course is not a factor that explains why students leave the course. Literature emphasises dropout occurs when students come with poor prior academic preparation, or in the absence of a commitment to the goal of completing the course or a commitment to the institution. It is also identified how low levels of engagement lead to the decision of leaving and how parental limited knowledge of the field of higher education is behind the decision. The elements observed among participants in this study would make them successful candidates in other contexts, and that means the problem could not be understood by using theories and models that work in other scenarios. In order to understand the phenomenon and develop relevant solutions for the particularities of dropout and persistence in academic elitism, it was necessary to incorporate a different perspective, and Bourdieu's work on the sociology of higher education provided a valuable tool for that purpose.

In answering the research questions of this study, I unveiled a discourse that was invisible to my eyes as an insider immerse in the *doxa* of academic elitism. The practices of marginalisation, non-inclusion and inequality that characterise the culture of academic elitism are legitimised by groups of power that maintain the status quo in the name of tradition and prestige. This is a school aimed at privileged students, not understood in terms of economic capital only, but privileged in terms of their alignment with the knowledge, behaviours, and values of the dominant culture. The interests of the dominant voices in academic elitism outweigh the policies of the broader higher education field, which advocate for opportunities for the participation and permanence of disadvantaged groups.

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How do students who persist overcome barriers to completion?

Students who persist report having a strong commitment to their goal and identify family and friends support as key elements to facilitate the process. Motivations to enrol are diverse, from personal interest of social mobility, prestige and access to positions of power, or an interest in working on issues of the national agenda, such as fighting poverty and inequality in society.

In order to persist, students need to develop both resilience and *academic capital* and this is achieved by means of high levels of effort, the internalisation of the culture of low reward, and the support from peers, who are key players in promoting engagement and academic development. The most important resource to promote persistence is time, and learning how to use it efficiently can represent a difference in how academic rigour is experienced. Students who have to displace study for paid work hours report an important disadvantage that leads students to lag behind, but not to leave.

The main use of time is to develop the most valuable capital in a course of academic elitism: *academic capital*. Similar to *cultural capital*, *academic capital* is accumulated over time and with opportunities to interact with others who share the relevant knowledge of the field. This latter element makes social capital a decisive factor in achieving academic development. The development of social capital, from bonding with people alike to bridging to those who can help close gaps, is the answer students find to compensate the absence of systematic support from school. This realisation does not come easy in a context that promotes competition and individuality, as captured by participants, *we are a family… not realising that makes us waste valuable*. Peers become mentors and mentees, and *persisters* learn the academic skills and adopt the behaviours of the fit students to become resilient, organised and efficient.

Among *persisters* there is an awareness of the advantage of having a natural talent, but it is not the most important asset to reach the goal of completing the course. I identify

three types of students who manage to persist. Those who are natural, fish in water navigating academic elitism with ease, the natural inherits of academic elitism. There are those who make a prompt transition and develop the values and behaviour of relevance to the field, the personification of meritocracy in academic elitism. And there are those who have the time, the commitment, the guidance and encouragement from friends and family to keep trying, despite chronic failure and despite school barriers, until they reach their goal, they are the tenacious of academic elitism.

How is membership of academic elitism gained?

A pivotal struggle for all participants in this study is how the *habitus* of academic elitism redefines the symbolic value of elements they bring to their university experience, such as time spent with family, self-caring activities and socialising with friends, which are now competing against elements of symbolic value for this context. For something to be considered as valuable within academic elitism, it has to be legitimised by the dominant group. It is under this environment that students have to gain their membership.

The findings of my study offer a panorama of the process students go through in building up their right to be accepted as worthy member of the community. Students who gain a place in the context of academic elitism but experience disadvantaged circumstances see their opportunities of attainment reduced. In such scenario, *student failure* is perceived as the result of deficit of the individual, and not the result of practices that normalise this type of outcome. Hence, students experience a transformation process that is cyclical, they have to implement, assess and redesign their approach to achieve the goal of becoming worthy members of the community.

The initial stage requires students to establish a clear commitment to the goal. This decision will determine the effort they are willing to invest and it will serve as a reason to continue despite failure. Behind this transformation, the School *habitus* is disengaging from

the costs this implies to students. For some, the transition into academic rigour requires breaking up strong associations from the past, leaving friends and even family aside to be fully dedicated to their studies. The isolation and emotional cost of such transition is not discussed nor considered as an element to approach, this is understood as a hidden discourse of carelessness that is part of the practices of academic elitism and the practices of *laissez-faire* which expects students to find their way without the intervention of the institution.

Students able to respond to the conditions presented to them take an initial strategy of shadowing better fit students, silently copying to cope. In the process, the loss of a self-concept of being naturally talented is identified, and a new approached is required. Effort is and academic buoyancy are the answer to overcome normalised failure. Behind this practice, a *doxa* of selectivity is fiercely aiming at imposing a culture of individualism and meritocracy. Distancing practices are internalised by students, who perceive lecturers as *supreme goods of the subject* and understand academics' pedagogic practices to be aimed at the better prepared students. In order to approach lecturers, students have to prove they belong to that group, and students who do not identify as *good enough,* replicate distancing as a strategy to cover for their *ignorance and poor fit.*

A second stage calls for a rearrangement of learning communities. Students tend to consolidate their study groups, in some cases new friends have to be made after initial friendships are lost because their peers have been suspended or leave the course. At this stage, shadowing progresses to a mentor-mentee relationships that emerge spontaneously through interaction and empathy. Students with low social capital or a high sense of shame due to failure exclude themselves from the benefits of learning communities, the result is usually reflected in lagging behind and taking more time to acquire the so needed *academic capital*. *Symbolic violence* is identified in the form of assessment practices that require students to be able to *think like an economist* in order to succeed. What I find behind that

phrase is the condition set by the dominant group, the need to not only acquire the knowledge of relevance to the field, but also *become one of them*.This is a complex task that is assessed through exams that give gatekeepers the *evidence* to allow or deny membership of the group. In this point of progression, a defining element to foster progression is the type of relationship students develop with lecturers. Fear and distancing replaced with trust and approachability help students recover the confidence in their ability to achieve. The rules of the game are internalised and a constant exercise of self-confidence is observed to stay afloat, in the words of participants: *failing does not mean you're not good.*

In the second half of the course, students are burnt out and identify the importance of self-care, despite the practices of the *habitus* of academic elitism, which prioritises academic progression over activities that promote wellbeing. Mental health issues are real and the stigma of this struggle does not allow students to show vulnerability. The experience of female students refers to frequent moments when they hide in the toilet to cry only to find other girls crying over the same frustration of failure. These experiences illustrate the effects of stress and anxiety in an environment that undermines students' self-concept and fails to provide support and guidance to overcome this burden. None of the male participants made a reference to instances of emotional vulnerability, yet the effects are presented in the discourse of feeling ashamed and *wanting to die,* which evidence the depth of emotions linked to the experience of gaining their membership. In this regard, family and friends from outside of the school environment become a fundamental source of encouragement to gain the strength needed to keep going.

How do faculty members perceive dropout and their role in the decision to stay or leave?

The awareness of the misalignment between the broader public education system and the demands of academic elitism is essential in the discussion of my findings. Because the School of Economics, UANL has to adopt the admission policies that serve the agenda of

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a mass higher education system, the possibilities to apply *optimal* admission practices are reduced. Academics in this context suggest the solution to a high dropout rate is to reduce the number of students enrolled by implementing a more selective process to admit only the fittest students. The commitment of the institution is with selectivity and not maximising the number of graduates, a practice generates conflicts under policies of a mass system.

A key finding of my study illustrates how the premise of the institutional commitment to support student persistence is not observed. Academic elitism in a mass system of higher education is contradictory by definition, it is a combination of selectivity practices with an expansion policy. Because policies prevent selectivity a priory, students experience selectivity practices after enrolment and throughout their permanence in the course. Pedagogic practices that marginalise disadvantaged students are legitimised by a School *habitus* that favours students who are able to acquire in a short time the *academic capital* and other elements of symbolic value for the School.

Academics expect students to absorb the cost of the misalignment between the demands of the academic practices of the area of study, and the type of *academic capital* offered by the broader educational system. Even though there are no explicit practices of exclusion, the hidden discourse of the School assumes the availability of economic, social and *cultural capital* in order to navigate academic elitism with ease, and those who lack such capital are doomed to fail. The weak implementation of institutional interventions to promote student support and student permanence, as it is the case of the tutorial programme promoted in all public universities in Mexico, reveals it is not a priority of academic elitism to generate opportunities for individuals who do not *have what it takes.*

The absence of a support system in a context that sets high expectations together with a high failure prospectus puts students in a trap of disengagement that leads to the explanation of dropout in terms of individual behaviours of not investing time and effort to

study. Faculty members identify themselves as *executioners* of a sentence they perceive to be out of their hands, it is the needs of the field, not theirs, and it is in the students' interest to do something in order to succeed. This notion is well identified by participants in saying *it's like they don't want you to graduate.* These words summarise how the status quo is fiercely defended by gatekeepers who are committed to keep practices that do not grant membership to individuals who do not align with the established logics of the field.

Figure 9.1 Conceptual model of academic elitism in a mass system of higher education

Student input
•High achievers
•High aspirations
•Motivated

University Mass-system

Institutional identity
• Elitist educational model
• Prestige
• Academic rigor
• Quality of education
• Lack of student support
• Limited capacity
• Inadequate admission policy
• Work under pressure

Faculty experience
• High achievers
• Hierarchical
• Knowledge as power
• Assertiveness
• Limited availability

School Elite-system

Faculty

Students

Student experience
• High achiever my identity is challenged
• Exerts high effort-Obtains poor outcomes
• Academic failure-hinders commitment to school
• Misaligned previous preparation

Student-Faculty interaction
• Individualism
• Mutual distancing practices
• Carelessness
• Lack of confidence towards faculty
• Push-Pull forces

Student output Persisters
• Self-concept compromised
• Individualistic mindset
• Resilient
• Highly trained as an economist

Student output Leavers
• Loss of self-concept as high achiever
• Defeated mindset
• Rejected
• Highly standard reference to future

Source: Elaborated by author

Figure 9.1 summarises the findings of the study of the phenomenon of dropout and persistence in the case of a course of academic elitism within a mass system of higher education.

9.2 Strengths and limitations of the study

The scope of this study is narrowed to dropout and persistence from a specific course and not from the whole of higher education. This micro approach allows a deeper exploration of the phenomenon of dropout and persistence in a context that is underrepresented in literature.

The phenomenological approach used in this study provides and insightful perspective of what influences students' decisions, what works for them to persist, and sheds light on how those experiences are internalised. The qualitative approach of this study offers a deep understanding of dynamics that occur beneath the observable factors that are usually reported in numerical ways. However, this approach is time consuming and data collection represents a challenge, particularly in recruiting students who decide to leave the course and are not easy to track and recruit.

Even though this is not necessarily a sensible subject and participants are not considered to be vulnerable, it is an emotional discussion, and this calls for an empathetic rapport to be established with participants in order to obtain extended, detailed and very honest data. Participants in this study were keen and enthusiastic about sharing their experiences, having a researcher that was known to the context provided proximity and trust, and I observed a similar attitude among faculty members who find their voices to be underrepresented in decision making at this School.

This research has offered an opportunity to empower agents immersed in an environment where hierarchies are well defined and individuals are treated in a very impersonal way. The time required to conduct qualitative exploratory research, and the emotional involvement it takes to explore personal experiences that include a sense of exclusion and failure could represent a challenge for the researcher, and this limitation should be considered in research design for further studies.

9.3 Implications for policy and practice

Higher education as an agent of transformation of society stimulates the interest in promoting the expansion of the university system. However, in practice, this expansion does not necessarily translate in opening up access to degrees that lead to positions of prestige and power in society. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (1973) helps us understand how the dominant groups in fields of power make efforts to maintain the status quo, and in facing the growing heterogeneity in student population, academic elitism responds with practices of *symbolic violence* that silently marginalise those who do not share the values and the culture of that particular segment of higher education.

The call for increased access, participation, and success of under-represented groups in higher education illustrates efforts to spread the benefits of education to a broader population, regardless of background elements that are associated to non-participation and non-completion. If the expansion of higher education is to be equalitarian and inclusive, the question that remains unanswered is how participation in academic elitism will be achieved among those in disadvantaged circumstances.

Although derived from the context of the study of the economic science, the findings of my study offer insights applicable to the broader higher education field. The notion that students whose characteristics misalign in significant ways with the elements of symbolic value and the internalised practices of a subject area, experience disadvantages in a non-visible way. When students aim at integrating into a field with a status quo that does not promote practices of inclusion and equality, a consciousness exercise is necessary for the institution to understand what is behind the *failure* of those students. For students to understand that the misalignment and associated institutional practices are deeply connected to the rules of the game, having a clear understanding of how the game is played will lead to reduce the assumption that failure is a result of individual deficit.

The practices that extend the selection process of students after admission and throughout the course call for a revision and clarity in the commitment institutions have to the students they admit and for a more diverse student profile to be included in the environment of academic elitism, inclusive pedagogies that facilitate the engagement with the logic of practice of a particular area of study are fundamental to transform a discourse of access into a practice that generates realistic opportunities of success. Additionally, the findings of this study call for a revision of the tutorial and pastoral care practices in higher education, and the extent to which academics are willing, ready and trained to take such important role that tends to be assumed as an administrative burden and not as a valuable opportunity to generate deep and rewarding transformations in students' and academics' lives.

9.4 Further research

The study of dropout and persistence presented in this study offers an initial exploration of student experiences and academics perceptions of a well-researched phenomenon but in a context that is underrepresented in the literature. Although the study presented in this thesis is bound by the particularities of a course with a discourse of high academic rigour and academic elitism, it gains in depth of the understanding of the hidden elements behind the decision to leave the course, and on the elements that facilitate permanence and attainment in an environment of academic elitism within a mass public university system.

Further research recommended includes the exploration of institutional attitudes towards supporting disadvantaged students in the transition process to an environment of academic elite and academic rigour, and the challenges of implementing practices to facilitate the process. Similarly, empiric evidence is needed to inform authorities on pedagogical practices that work in detriment of academic development in an environment

of rigor, as finding of this study suggests students experience teaching practices to be a barrier to academic integration.

Economic support in the form of scholarships and grants is an issue identified to have an impact on persistence, and further research could help identify more efficient and fair ways of assigning those resources to promote persistence among students at risk due to economic hardship.

An important area of research identified from the findings of this study draws attention to the carelessness practices observed in academic elitism. The feeling of abandonment identified in students in this context and the priority academics put to performativity requirements over student experiences calls for research into what works to better promote student development, student sense of belonging, and eventually attainment.

For fields of study known to hold positions of power and be male dominated, further research on issues of sexism is needed to promote equality not only in the access and attainment of education in fields of power, but eventually a more balanced participation of both men and women in the practice of disciplines of influence in society, as it is the case of economics.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent form (students and faculty members)

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview (students)

Appendix 3: Semi-structured interviews (faculty members)

Appendix 4: Barriers to completion to guide semi-structured interviews

Appendix 5: Reported reasons for leaving the course known to the School of Economics

Appendix 1: Consent form (students and faculty members)

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by María Ana Chavana Villalobos, PhD student at the Department of Education, University of York. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the factors that influence the decision to stay or leave a course of studies at undergraduate level in a public university in Mexico, and how these relate to students background and prior experiences.

- My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.
- I understand that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
- Participation involves being interviewed and the interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I don't want to be taped, I will not be able to participate in the study. I understand I will have an opportunity to comment on the written record once it has been produced.
- I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
- Faculty and administrators from my school will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.
- I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Education Ethics Committee, Department of Education, University of York. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the Committee may be contacted through Dr. Paul Wakeling, supervisor of this research project.
- I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____   _____
Name and signature of participant   Date

For further information, please contact:
Education Ethics Committee education-research-administrator@york.ac.uk
Dr. Paul Wakeling, paul.wakeling@york.ac.uk
Maria Ana Chavana Villalobos, maria-ana.chavana@york.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview (students)

Interview guide

Academic experiences

- ✓ How would you describe your years of study prior to university? / How would you describe yourself as a student?

- ✓ How was your experience… ask about academic performance, socializing in school and outside school, relation with teachers, support from parents, family needs, skills, abilities

- ✓ When you started your course, did you feel ready to become a 'university student'? How so?

Cultural and social practices

- ✓ What changes did you experience in your social life when you started university?

- ✓ Was there anything that required you to make a particular effort?

- ✓ Reading habits, spending more time with friends outside school, social networks, etc.
- ✓ The decision (slight differences in wording, depending on the decision made)
- ✓ (*PERSISTERS*)

- ✓ Have you ever experienced the idea of leaving the course?

- ✓ When did you first notice you considered leaving the course?

- ✓ What actions did you undertake?

- ✓ (*LEAVERS*)

- ✓ When did you first notice you wanted to leave the course?

- ✓ What actions did you undertake?

- ✓ QUESTIONS FOR BOTH GROUPS: *PERSISTERS* AND *LEAVERS*

- ✓ Did you talk to someone else about the idea of leaving the course?

- ✓ What was the most relevant thing about that/ those conversations?

- ✓ Was the reaction of that/those persons what you expected? How so?

- ✓ If you did not discuss it with someone else, why did you decide to keep it to yourself?

- ✓ How did you know when you were ready to make a decision?

- ✓ Why did you decide to stay / leave?

- ✓ Aim at not only reasons related to school matters, but factors reflected in the survey

- ✓ Integration factors (academic and social) *

- ✓ Motivation and expectations*

- ✓ Institutional factors*
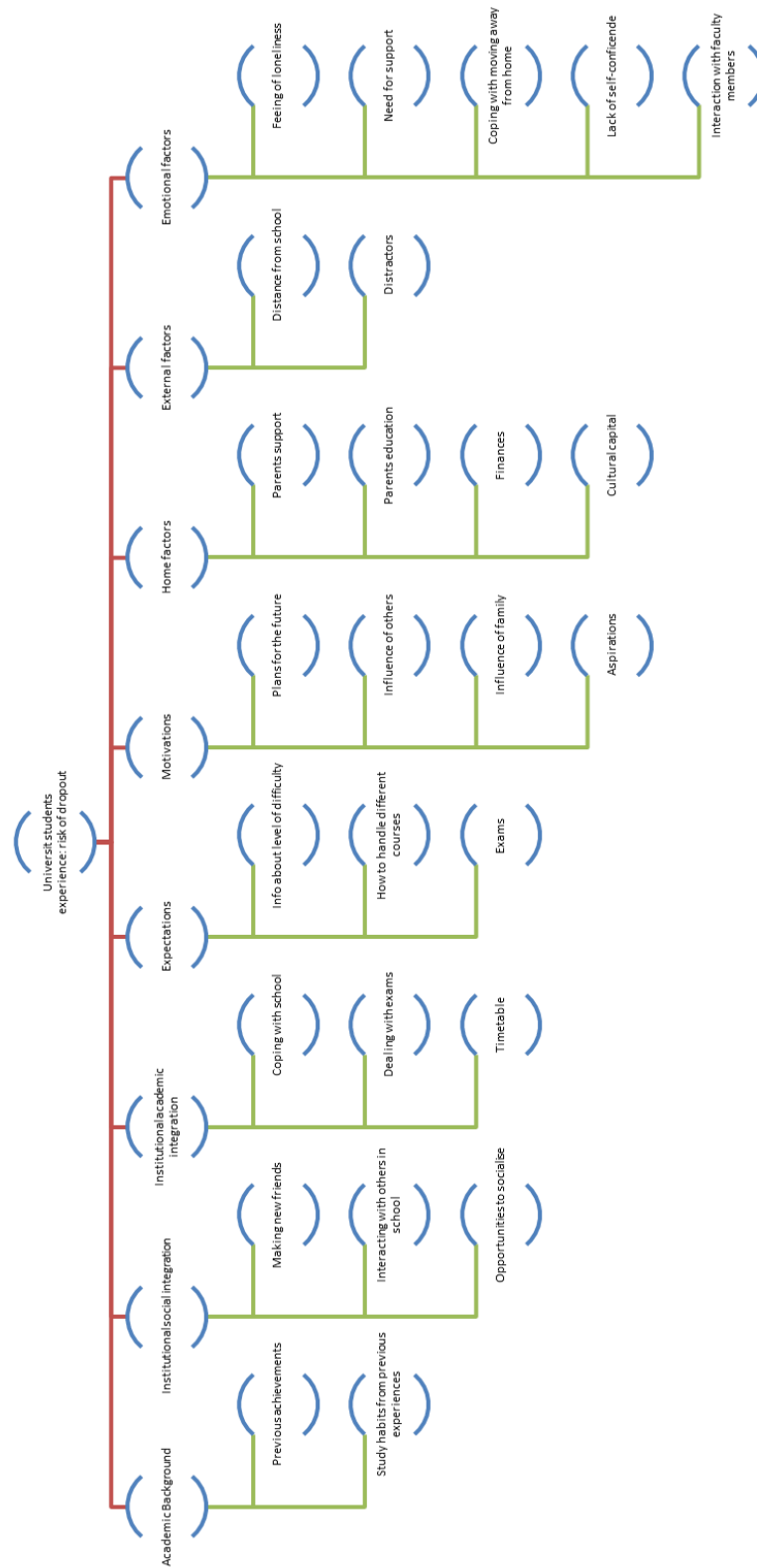
Home factors *
Personal factors*
- ✓ How do you feel about your decision?

- ✓ Did you find yourself comparing your experience with others?

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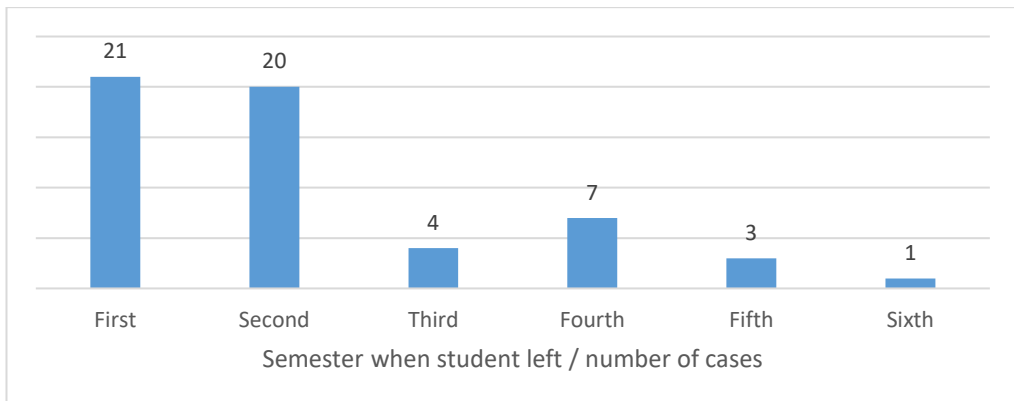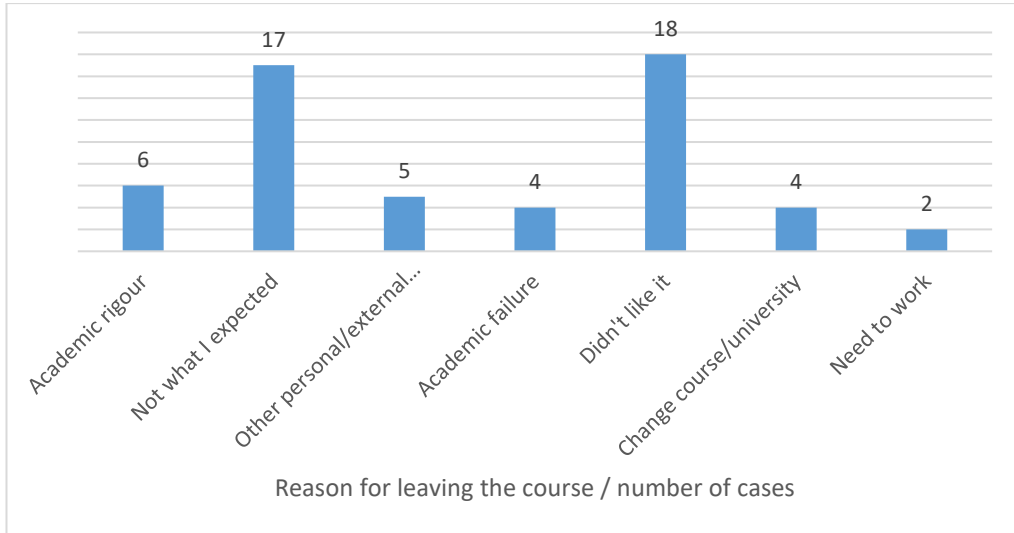**Appendix 3:** Semi-structured interviews (faculty members)

Interview guide

1. Would you consider dropout to be a problem at the School of Economics?

2. Do you participate in the tutorial proramme? Incentives? – Any reasons not to? If yes, what has been your experience? What Works and what doesn't? Elicit on preparation to be a tutor. School support towards tutorial programme?

3. Have students ever approached you with doubts regarding their permanence / percistence in the course? How did you approach the situation? How did you feel in that situation? Do you recall the reasons that pushed the student to consider leaving the course?

4. Regarding the transition to higher education, and particularly to this course, in your opinion, whose commitment and interest is it to support students in the transition? Are there any actions or practices you consider relevant to promote?

5. Do you promote in class practices that help students develop academic skills such as note taking, time management, critical thinking, etc?

6. Regarding exams, do you identify the main difficulties faced by students who do not manage to pass exams in your module? Do you work on exam preparation in class? Do you identify strategies that have helped students have a satisfactory academic performance?

7. Students are expected to be dedicated full-time to their studies and spend long hours at School, do you consider the school provides what students need to meet that expectation? Do you consider the institution could do more in this regard?

8. Students report working under pressure and experiencing mental health issues, would you say the School has a commitment to the student wellbeing? Whose interest is it?

9. Some students come being first in their family to go to university, what is your stand on parental involvement?

10. In your experience, do you identify any type of support students' need that could be provided by the School? By parents? Other?

Appendix 4. Barriers to completion to guide semi-structured interviews

Universit students experience: risk of dropout

- Academic Background
  - Previous achievements
  - Study habits from previous experiences
- Institutional social integration
  - Making new friends
  - Interacting with others in school
  - Opportunities to socialise
- Institutional academic integration
  - Coping with school
  - Dealing with exams
  - Timetable
- Expectations
  - Info about level of difficulty
  - How to handle different courses
  - Exams
- Motivations
  - Plans for the future
  - Influence of others
  - Influence of family
  - Aspirations
- Home factors
  - Parents support
  - Parents education
  - Finances
  - Cultural capital
- External factors
  - Distance from school
  - Distractors
- Emotional factors
  - Feeing of loneliness
  - Need for support
  - Coping with moving away from home
  - Lack of self-conficende
  - Interaction with faculty members

Appendix 5: Reported reasons for leaving the course known to the School of Economics

Reason for leaving the course / number of cases

Semester when student left / number of cases

Glossary and Abbreviations

ANUIES   Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior

(National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions)

CENEVAL   Centro Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior

(National Centre for Assessment in Higher Education)

CIEES   Comités Interinstitucional para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior, A.C.

(Interinstitutional Committee for the Assessment of Higher Education)

CONAPO   Consejo Nacional de Población

(National Population Council)

CONEVAL   Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Politica de Desarrollo Social

(National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policies)

INEGI   Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática

(National Institute of Statistics and Geography)

PRODEP   Programa para el Desarrollo Profesional Docente

(Programme for the Development of Teaching Academics)

SNI   Sistema Nacional de Investigadores

(National Researchers System)

UANL   Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León

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