A LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE DEFINITIONS OF DROPOUT IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Context

- **Dropout and Retention** in Online Higher Education (OHE)
  - higher rates of dropout (from course and degree); important subject

- The issue with *definitions*
  - Dropout: student's failure to enroll for a definite number of successive semesters
  - many different definitions of dropout in the literature, usually related to a temporal conception; the issue is controversial
Context

• The issue with definitions
  • related concepts are often employed, some as synonymous –attrition, withdrawal, non-completion– and others as antonymous -retention, persistence, continuance, completion, and success.
  • suffer from the same imprecision
  • inconsistent terminology is problematic because the ways dropout is defined determine how it is measured, tackled, and researched
  • single course definition is prevalent; also dropout from degree
A Scoping Review of Dropout in OHE

• summarizes part of a scoping review of dropout in OHE (Xavier & Meneses, 2020)
• focusing on dropout (and related concepts) definitions
• scoping method: when key concepts in the body of literature are less well defined in advance

Method

• scoping review framework proposed by Arksey and O’Malley (2005)
• specific research question:
  • How was dropout (and related concepts) defined in recent OHE dropout research?
• various sources (2 key databases, 8 key journals, Google Scholar, etc.)
• period: 2014-2018
• 138 papers were selected (40% of which doctoral dissertations)

Results

Definitions and concepts

• majority of papers did not provide a clear definition of the central concepts employed
• 78% of the studies that used the concept of withdrawal, 70% of the ones that employed dropout, and 63% of those using retention did not define such concepts
• persistence and completion were defined more often (65% and 56% of the studies that employed them)
Definitions and concepts

Examples of definitions: Attrition
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts and definitions</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Shared characteristics/Selected references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attrition</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>From author(s)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18.37</td>
<td>• Attrition as failing (depending on grades) or withdrawing from course or program was prevalent (Dews-Farrar, 2018; Glazier, 2016; Zimmerman &amp; Johnson, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>• Three papers defined attrition as leaving the university (Figueira, 2015; Hart, 2014; York, 2014).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>• Most papers employed other concepts (dropout, completion, withdrawal, retention) to define attrition (Figueira, 2015; Knestrick et al., 2016; Nadasen, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From literature</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.61</td>
<td>• Most common definition was failing to complete, or not continuing, course or program (Burgess, 2017; Huggins, 2017; Lucey, 2018; Wright, 2015).</td>
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<td>• Two papers defined attrition as leaving the institution (Moore, D., 2014; Nuesell, 2016).</td>
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<td>• Only one paper mentioned a specific timeframe (Hannah, 2017).</td>
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<td>• Two papers (Strebe, 2016; Struble, 2014) defined attrition as a synonym of dropout, and one as the antonym of retention (Johnson, C., 2015).</td>
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<td>• Martinez (2003) was the most employed author for definitions (Lucey, 2018; Russo-Gleicher, 2014; Wright, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Provided</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>51.02</td>
<td>• Many papers simply did not provide any definition (Ali &amp; Smith, 2015; Bawa, 2016).</td>
</tr>
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<td>• Two papers did not provide a definition but employed the concept specifically in relation to courses (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, &amp; Leeds, 2014; Greenland &amp; Moore, 2014).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Definitions and concepts

Examples of definitions: Dropout
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dropout</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Shared characteristics/Selected references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| From author(s)   | 11| 22.45| • Definitions varied wildly; some focused on dropout from an institution or program in a time period (2-4 semesters) (Brock, 2014; Gregori, Martínez, & Moyano-Fernández, 2018).  
• Others focused on dropout from course(s), depending on sitting exams (Deschascht & Goeman, 2015; Tan & Shao, 2015). |
| From literature  | 4 | 8.16 | • Definitions varied wildly; some focused on graduating or not, voluntarily or involuntarily; others on withdrawing from courses, depending also on grades (Franko, 2015; Gangaram, 2015; Grau-Valldosera & Minguillon, 2014; Seabra, Henriques, Cardoso, Barros, & Goulão, 2018). |
| Not Provided     | 34| 69.39| • Three papers did not provide a definition but employed the concept specifically in relation to courses (Burgos et al., 2018; Croxton, 2014; Mahmodi & Ebrahimzade, 2015).  
• Others mentioned course or program (Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017; Yukselturk, Ozekes, & Türel, 2014), or course or institution (Sanz, Vírseda, Garcia, & Arias, 2018; Woodley & Simpson, 2014). |
Results

Definitions and concepts

• **Completion** (of course or program) seems to be a clearer, less controversial concept
• Many papers defined concepts such as *attrition, persistence, and success* employing other related concepts, sometimes without defining the latter
• Definitions of **dropout** varied wildly but centered upon dropping out from either institution, program or course, during a certain time period
• Comparatively few papers drew definitions from *previous literature* (with the exception of papers that employed attrition, persistence, and retention, where half of the definitions came from other authors)
• there is not still a theoretical continuance in the field
Conclusions: A Complex Phenomenon without a Clear Definition

- Dropout-related phenomena are complex and thus require clear definitions. However, the field is almost chaotic in that regard.
- Vast majority of the papers studied did not provide any definition; when they did, usually they did not employ previous definitions.
- Some definitions are narrow, others very broad and vague, and most are used interchangeably.
- Most definitions are designed as institutional indicators (e.g. retention as completion of a course or a program).
Conclusions: A Complex Phenomenon without a Clear Definition

• Definitions usually do not consider factors such as transfer to another institution
• stakeholders and policy makers have little accurate and reliable information about dropouts (results are not comparable)
• which affects monitoring and comparing interventions in practice
• inconsistent terminology is crucial: the whole field depends on the definitions it employs
• developing common standard definitions and data collection procedures would benefit the field and impact policy and retention strategies
Thank you