

Dropout, stopout, and time challenges in open online higher education: A qualitative study of the first-year student experience

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Early dropout in online higher education remains a complex challenge intrinsically linked to stopout behaviour. Time poverty and time-related conflicts seem to be central for these phenomena; however, time issues have seldom been studied from the perspective of learners. This qualitative study explored retrospectively the lived experiences of time among first-year students who withdrew from an open university. Content analysis of in-depth interviews with 16 undergraduate learners examined comparatively how they experienced and managed time and how time challenges impacted their decision to withdraw. Findings indicate that time poverty and time-related conflicts were the main factor behind such a decision, especially for part-time non-traditional learners, and that the foundational semester was crucial. Time challenges appeared connected mostly to student and situational factors: students' life circumstances, time management or procrastination, and unrealistic expectations. Life circumstances affecting health, family, or work were the most important factor for the majority, particularly the dropouts. While stopouts managed to improve their time-conditions and re-enrol later, most dropouts failed to balance academic duties with time-consuming personal commitments. Two temporal models are presented, connecting the main reported factors with the students' foundational semester and lifeload. These insights into time challenges can advance student-informed strategies to foster student retention.

Keywords: dropout; stopout; online education; first-year

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Introduction

Background: The problems of dropout and stopout

Over the last two decades, the complex problem of high dropout rates in online higher education (OHE) has been widely investigated, attempting to identify predictor variables and profiles of at-risk students (Bawa, 2016). Early dropout, especially during the first year of enrolment, is typical of OHE programmes, sometimes reaching 50% of first-year students; in open universities, dropping out is the norm (Simpson, 2013). Stopout (enrolment breaks) rates in online programmes are higher than in on-campus programmes (James, 2020) and often lead to programme dropout and non-graduation (Grau-Valldosera et al., 2018). According to Simpson (2013), ‘the biggest problem in distance education is student dropout’ (p. 117).

Dropout is commonly defined as a student's failure to enrol for a definite number of successive semesters. However, the issue is controversial and there is an array of different dropout definitions in the literature (Xavier & Meneses, 2020). In this study, dropout was operationalized as non-enrolment in a programme for two consecutive semesters. Persistence represents the opposite of dropout, alluding to successful course completion and continuous enrolment. Stopout refers to students who have not maintained continuous enrolment for a period (in our case, one semester) but do return and re-enrol. Thus, withdrawal can be temporary (stopout) or definitive (dropout). Of course, dropouts may also return to the university at any time (after two or more semesters of non-enrolment), which is one of the main difficulties in operationalizing definitions and comparing dropout and stopout behaviour: the time frame for being considered a dropout is relatively arbitrary. However, as most re-

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enrolments happen within the first year of studies (Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 2016), the two semesters window seems to provide a good operational definition.

The factors that influence dropout and persistence in OHE have been widely investigated (Kara et al., 2019). Reviewing key dropout factors, Lee and Choi (2011) found that among the most important ones were student factors such as academic skills and background, time management skills, and motivation; course and programme factors like course design and academic support; and environmental factors such as work situation, family and job responsibilities, and life circumstances. Stopout factors in OHE are very similar to dropout factors, but stopouts are more predisposed to effectively re-enrol when they have previous academic experience and career motivation for studying (Grau-Valldosera et al., 2018).

This study focuses on the first-year experience, which is critical for student retention and success (Henry, 2018) and the period during which most attrition occurs in OHE (Simpson, 2010). That may happen for a variety of reasons. Online learning is largely self-regulated and dependent upon the students' agency, skills, and ability to manage conflictive commitments. Many learners begin their studies without previous OHE experience, lacking academic preparedness and familiarity with the OHE model and what it requires. Hence, first-year transition can be particularly strenuous for online learners (Korstange et al., 2020).

The time-factor for dropout and stopout

Although reviews typically mention several factors correlated with dropout in OHE, time-related challenges appear to be key factors that influence performance, persistence, and attrition: time poverty (paucity of quantity and quality of time: Wladis et al., 2020)

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and time-related conflicts (Simpson, 2013; Xavier & Meneses, 2018), inadequate time management skills, and ability to juggle multiple responsibilities (Lee & Choi, 2011).

These issues are influenced by both OHE and student characteristics, particularly for first-year learners. First, the vast majority of OHE students are time-poor: busy, non-traditional part-time learners with time-consuming, competing work and/or family demands (Samra et al., 2021), which have been correlated with higher levels of time poverty and stress (Wladis et al., 2020). Thus, the temporal and spatial *flexibility* offered by asynchronous OHE is the main attraction and need for them; however, flexibility can also be a source of stress and conflict between different commitments (Wladis et al., 2020). Second, the students' *misconceptions* or unrealistic expectations regarding the workload, time, discipline, and effort required by OHE (Bawa, 2016), and *overestimation* of their own readiness, available time, and capacities (Korstange et al., 2020). Third, self-regulation skills, especially *time management* to deal effectively with OHE demands and job/family commitments, are essential for success and persistence (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Students with a heavy workload tend to persist and succeed, provided they have good time management skills to deal effectively with competing demands and remain motivated (Katiso, 2015). On the other hand, *academic procrastination* and poor time management are connected to poor performance and higher dropout rates (Michinov et al., 2011). Lack of time and procrastination are primary reasons for students failing or dropping an online course (Ashby, 2004). That may lead to 'inter-semester' procrastination (stopout): postponing enrolment continuance, which commonly leads to degree/institution attrition.

In sum, conflictive demands and time poverty raised by engaging with OHE degrees seem to be central for stopout and attrition, the main challenge being integrating personal and professional life with academic duties and carving out time to study (Grau-

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Valldosera et al., 2018). Thus, time is by far the biggest challenge for student persistence in the first year (Simons et al., 2018). Ashby (2004) found that the most important reasons for dropout were ‘the difficulties students have in juggling their studies with other aspects of their lives’, concluding that ‘time is clearly a major issue for Open University students’ (p. 72).

Justifications

Although time-related issues seem to be a key factor behind withdrawal from OHE, they are seldom studied (McNeill, 2010); research usually does not address the time-factor *specifically*. Dropout is a complex phenomenon, hardly graspable by quantitative methods alone; it demands in-depth qualitative inquiry to understand the reasons given by students in the context of their experiences and circumstances (Greenland & Moore, 2021). Yet, there is a dearth of qualitative inquiry on the lived experiences of online first-year students linking OHE learning with the rest of the student’s life (Kahu et al., 2014). Comparing first-year experiences among non-traditional and traditional and full-time and part-time students is critical for understanding how to remedy such OHE issues, as there may be fundamental differences between these cohorts (Henry, 2018). Moreover, comparing the perspectives of learners who leave the university prematurely (dropouts) and learners who take an early break but do manage to return (stopouts) allows for generating insights on the common problems both cohorts face – but also on what may distinguish them. Their experiences may also complement the literature, which usually focuses on persistence and retention, providing a completer and more situated picture of OHE dropout. This has become exceedingly important with the exacerbation by the impact of COVID19 of the *online turn* - the growing trend in higher education (HE) towards transitioning to online teaching (Xavier & Meneses, 2021).

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With HE institutions being compelled to adopt online delivery overnight, the problem of first-year OHE dropout will likely become even more pressing (Kember et al., 2021).

Research aim

To address such research gaps, the main aim of this study is to examine how first-year OHE students experienced and managed their time and how it impacted their stopout behaviour or dropout, comparing their respective profiles.

Methods

Setting

This research was carried out at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), a fully online university characterized by flexibility of admission, permanence, and enrolment requirements, and the employment of asynchronous delivery and continuous assessment. UOC's typical students (~90%) are non-traditional learners: adults with jobs and/or family responsibilities. The dropout rate in UOC undergraduate programmes is 57.6%, with first-semester dropouts accounting for nearly half of this total; almost half of the new students drop out in the first year. There is a strong relationship between early stopout and dropout; 80% of UOC students who take a break in the second semester become true dropouts, leaving the university (Grau-Valldosera et al., 2018).

Design and participants

This single qualitative case study (Yin, 2003) employed an exploratory, cross-sectional, ex-post-facto design, and an interpretive approach. To broadly represent the different profiles of first-year learners, purposive, criterion-based sampling was employed, using a maximum variation sampling approach (Patton, 2015). Our sample did not mirror the

overall distribution of the student population, as our aim was not to obtain a representative sample, but to compare experiences of students with different profiles.

Prospective participants had started their online undergraduate studies at UOC in the Fall 2017 semester and were divided into two groups, according to their re-enrolment status registered in their academic records: stopouts (students who had withdrawn by Spring 2017 but returned in Fall 2018), and dropouts (students who had withdrawn by Spring 2017 and did not enrol for two consecutive semesters). Student profiles were generated according to the following criteria:

- age when starting OHE: non-traditional (≥ 25 years-old) or traditional students;
- enrolment: full-time (enrolled in more than 18 credits ECTS - European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) or part-time;
- gender: male or female.

That generated 16 different profiles; we aimed at selecting one student per profile. Out of a cohort of 1916 dropouts and 1076 stopouts, 256 dropouts and 278 stopouts gave consent to be contacted. The research team sent an email to all these eligible students inviting them to take part in the study and obtained 54 positive responses (24 dropouts and 30 stopouts). From this cohort a total of 16 voluntary participants were selected (50% females). However, as we did not manage to find participants for some full-time profiles, they were substituted with part-time learners belonging to similar profiles (Table 1). Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Ethical approval from the relevant university was granted and all participants gave informed consent before taking part in the study. Each student received a €30 gift voucher as economic compensation and an incentive to participate.

Table 1. Participants

	Profile	Dedication	Participant	Age (2017.1)	Other commitments	Previous HE/OHE experience
S T O P O U T S	Traditional (<25 y-o)	Part-time	John	22	Full-time job (FT) + family care	On-campus
			Anna	23	Part-time job (PT)	None
			Clara	21	PT + studies 2 degrees	OHE + On-campus
		Full-time	Aline	21	PT + 2 degrees	On-campus + distance HE
	Non-traditional (≥25 y-o)	Part-time	Chris	32	FT	On-campus
			Beth	42	FT + baby care	On-campus + distance
			Judith	53	FT + family care	Distance
		Full-time	Tony	29	FT	Distance
D R O P O U T S	Traditional	Part-time	Mark	18	Part-time education	None
			Zoe	22	2 degrees	On-campus
		Full-time	* No volunteers found			
	Non-traditional	Part-time	Robert	29	FT	On-campus
			Charles	30	FT	On-campus
			Edward	26	FT	On-campus
			Mar	30	None	On-campus
			Jessica	38	FT + family care	Distance
Full-time	Paul	35	FT + son (2 nd semester)	On-campus		

Data collection

In-depth hour-long semi-structured interviews were conducted (mostly in person; four via Skype) during the second half of the Fall 2018 semester, employing open-ended questions to elicit information on the students' personal experiences. Students were asked about their reasons for non-re-enrolment and their experiences in their first year of studies – focusing on time-related issues, deduced from the literature explored above: time management, procrastination, time pressure and its effects, and suchlike. Aiming at in-depth breadth of inquiry, questions also explored students' motivations, reasons for choosing OHE, support received, and demands (see examples of guidance questions in Appendix A). Interview protocols are available upon request.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and iteratively analysed using Schreier's (2012) qualitative content analysis, searching for selected aspects of meaning that were relevant to the research aims. A double coding process was developed to generate the main common themes and subthemes from the interviews. The first author read all the interviews several times and produced a trial coding, which was then discussed with the second author, revising and expanding the emergent coding scheme with refined understandings and insights, until a final coding was agreed upon by both authors.

Limitations

This is an exploratory, preliminary study geared towards identifying key issues to inform future studies with larger samples. Our sample was relatively small and recruited from one open university, which limits generalization. However, we sought to capture the diversity of students' experiences with varied profiles. Thus, our findings may be useful for other OHE settings with diverse student populations. The timeframe (two semesters of non-enrolment) chosen to characterize dropouts is also problematic.

Although unlikely, dropouts may in fact be taking a break of one year or more from their studies but return later. However, in retrospective studies, their experiences must be recent. Lastly, this study was conducted prior to the COVID pandemic, which may have changed considerably the dynamics and perceptions of time and withdrawal.

Results

This section summarizes our results as regards the study's aims, employing illustrative vignettes. For reasons of clarity, our findings are structured according to the main themes and subthemes developed and discussed comparatively, first in relation to dropout participants and then to stopouts.

The first-semester experience

Transition difficulties

Most students who dropped out experienced several difficulties in their first semester, mostly with course design and getting adapted to the novelty of the OHE system.

Younger, traditional part-time students (TPTs) stressed that: Mark had serious trouble with courses, ascribed to lack of previous experience, resources, and face-to-face teacher support. Zoe had problems with her courses due to programme and course design – ‘in my programme, there were weekly assignments’ - and with the specificities of the asynchronous online delivery mode, to which she was not used:

[It] forces you to organize [your learning] yourself. Of course, the instructors will explain [the content] and help you, but you won't go to a certain place every day where a physical person explains everything to you, or to whom you can say ‘Look, I didn't understand what you just explained’. Such change is shocking.

That also appeared in two reports of non-traditional part-time students (NTPTs): ‘I hadn't studied for seven years. I lost the [study] habits, their time structure and time dedication. In my case, as I didn't have many references nor colleagues... it's hard to adapt, and meanwhile you're losing time’ (Charles). Lack of previous OHE experience led them to comparisons with what they expected from a face-to-face delivery mode: ‘Because it's not face-to-face, not synchronous... In comparison, the feedback is very slow’ (Edward). However, three NTPTs (Robert, Mar, and Jessica) and the non-traditional full-time (NTFT) dropout (Paul) said that, far from having problems with the OHE system, they quite liked it, especially its flexibility, which allowed them autonomy to self-manage their time.

Transition and OHE system difficulties were less prevalent among the stopouts, but three part-time students mentioned them. ‘First semester, you don’t know how to find stuff’ (Anna); ‘Being online, that is, not having a teacher who explains things to you, and your doubts as well’ (Beth). Full-time stopouts did not mention such issues. It seems lack of academic preparedness for the online education model impacted dropouts and stopouts alike, but especially the former. Noticeably, with the exception of Clara, all students in both groups had no previous OHE experience; two (Anna, Mark) had no prior HE experience at all, while the others had it, either in face-to-face or distance (but not online) modes, although some of them had acquired it many years before.

Student expectations

The gap between students’ misconceptions and expectations and their actual experience also contributed to non-re-enrolment. With one exception, all dropouts had unrealistic expectations, which were either externally attributed to online studies in general (i.e., that their studies would be less demanding in terms of time and effort) or internally attributed (i.e., that students would have more available time or be more dedicated). External attribution was mentioned more often: ‘I expected I’d dedicate less time. I didn’t suppose I’d have assessment activities that’d take more of my time than understanding the theory’ (Mark). ‘I thought it’d be less difficult’ (Charles). However, some students blamed themselves: ‘Maybe it was my fault, I enrolled in too many credits’ (Robert); ‘I thought I’d have to devote less. You spend all your time doing work. Perhaps I was too optimistic’ (Paul).

Stopouts mentioned less often wrong expectations as impacting their time and difficulties: half of them reported that their expectations in relation to difficulty, demands, and time investment were correct. However, three students reported that they

had unrealistic expectations regarding themselves. ‘I thought I’d be very stable, like, “every day you’ll dedicate two hours” [to study], but during the first semester it wasn’t like that at all’ (Anna). Only Chris thought the studies ‘would demand much less’.

Motivations for studying

Student motivations for engaging with OHE studies were markedly different between dropouts and stopouts. Most dropouts (5) and two stopouts had career motivations – furthering professional prospects – but only Chris had a secure promotion when graduating. Most stopouts (6) and three dropouts had mostly personal or vocational motivations. None of the participants had their studies financed by their employer, or an external (professional) obligation to continue with their studies.

Time-related challenges and experiences

Time management

Time management skills and procrastination had a huge impact for most participants, in terms of both their first-year experience and their decision to withdraw. For TPT dropouts, procrastination was an important but not severe problem: ‘If I left the [tasks] for later, I didn’t do them. It happened only close to the end of the semester, Christmas time, the first exams’ (Mark). NTPT dropouts presented distinct experiences: for half of them, procrastination and poor time organisation were deemed crucial. ‘[My] time management skills and organization for the studies: horrible. I’m very chaotic in that regard’ (Robert). ‘There wasn’t a single assignment that I didn’t submit in the latest day. I distract easily, since I was born, minimal effort’ (Charles). However, the other half (Edward, Mar, Jessica) reported that they had good time management, provided

they had enough motivation. Paul, the full-time dropout, said he had very good time management skills and no procrastination at all.

For the part-time stopouts, time management experiences were mixed.

Traditional learners ascribed more importance to their academic procrastination. Anna blamed it for her decision to take a break in her second semester when confronted with course failure and a new, demanding job: 'I procrastinated. Totally. Because at that time I could afford it. But then having more work hours, more commitments... if I'd procrastinated, I'd have failed the last semester'. 'I'm very bad at that whole time management thing... Not a problem, though, because I've been doing that for years and I know how to manage it' (Clara). However, John said he had very good time management skills: 'I like to have everything well-planned'. NTPTs had less problems with such an issue; Beth, because of time limitations, improved her skills, and Judith said she had very good time management. The male NTPT, however, decided to take a break because of such issues: 'I managed very badly my time the first semester. [Procrastination] is my definition as a person. It definitely became a problem [due to] overconfidence in my capabilities' (Chris). For the full-timers, results were mixed too. The traditional participant adapted well to OHE demands:

As you have [continuous] assignments, which count the most, you must keep abreast.

Leaving everything for the end isn't an option. When I must do something, I just do it.

I've never been late in a submission in my life because that's clear to me (Aline).

However, the non-traditional student experienced severe procrastination and cramming in his first semester, which led to poor achievement and the decision to stop out:

I used to do the assessment [assignments] in the last moment. Last semester I tried to change that, and it didn't happen once. 'Well, I'll just leave this for next week'.

And when I couldn't do that, all the tasks kept piling up and eventually you just can't manage it (Tony).

Time conflicts and pressure

Time conflicts and time-pressure, often connected to poor time management and procrastination, impacted most students, at times causing anxiety and health problems, and influencing their decisions to withdraw. Yet, TPT dropouts, who had fairly good time management skills and no serious time pressure, hardly suffered such ailments: 'Just a little bit. Stress and anxiety due to scant time and myself' (Mark); 'Not during the first semester' (Zoe). However, non-traditional dropouts experienced severe time conflicts because of other concurrent commitments.

Leisure and family life: it's over... I didn't have time to study everything, and when I did study, I slept very little, it took many hours, and I was very stressed out. I felt I only lived for working and studying under stress (Edward).

'Lots of pressure. Then you never see the sun... I was burnt out. Of course, it wasn't just the studies. Mind you, there was also a family factor. And the work factor' (Jessica). However, some felt time pressure because of their poor time management: 'Due to my own lack of management at the individual level, not because of the workload' (Robert).

Similar patterns appeared with stopout participants. TPT female students with job responsibilities felt serious time conflicts and their effects in terms of anxiety and health: 'There was a moment I felt I didn't have a life anymore' (Anna). 'I tried... like a small boat in the sea that almost sank. I had a sort of anxiety attack, I passed out from exhaustion, so the doctor told me to stop. I felt a lot of pressure' (Clara). Yet, the male TPT did not feel such pressure: 'Passing the courses doesn't stress me much' (John). Among NTPTs, both genders experienced stress and time-pressure: Chris felt 'a lot of

stress and anxiety’, and Beth said that ‘the first semester was super stressful, trying to reach all the results, and also care for my baby girl... a lot of pressure and anxiety’.

Both full-time participants felt strong time-pressure: ‘In the first semester... I was very stressed out. When the exams are finished, you’re almost sick. Then anxiety and stress got me’ (Aline). ‘Pressure because of family responsibilities, and with work. Pressure especially when you’re late with your commitments, overwhelmed and discouraged’ (Tony).

Failing courses

Interestingly, failing or withdrawing from courses did not necessarily follow such time-related issues, but happened often. Among the dropouts, only Charles and Edward failed or withdrew from their courses in their first semester. Among the stopouts, John, Chris, and Tony failed all the courses they had enrolled in. Failing because of lack of organization, time, and preparedness heavily impacted their motivation and determined their decisions to withdraw. Significantly, all these participants were men; however, gender differences are difficult to ascertain here, because all of them were enrolled in rather demanding programmes (Computer Sciences) with high dropout rates. The other participants completed all their first semester courses.

Main dropout and stopout motives

The main reasons given by our participants for withdrawing confirm the overwhelming importance of the time-factor. Apart from Judith and Robert, NTPTs who left their studies mainly due to economic reasons, all the other students in our sample reported that time poverty was the main reason for their decision. Life circumstances and external stressors were blamed for that by 12 participants. Personal health issues (Clara’s severe burnout) or those of a family member (John’s wife), unexpected job

changes such as increased workload (Anna, Aline, Chris, Mark, Zoe), or family care circumstances (Beth, Paul) made these learners so time-poor that they decided to stop their studies, prioritising work and family. In many cases, poor time management and lack of OHE experience intensified such problematic situations. For instance, Charles's job and family routines changed unexpectedly – but he recognized that his lack of online experience, inadequate enrolment choices, and poor self-organization also impacted severely his time availability and studies. However, two dropouts (Edward and Mar) blamed their self-regulation skills, and not external circumstances, for their time paucity and subsequent withdrawal. Finally, Beth summarized what almost all of our participants experienced before leaving their studies: 'It had everything to do with time. Time is the issue. My problem is time. And that's it'.

Main reasons for returning

Stopout participants gave different reasons for their re-enrolment in the third semester, after taking a break. However, apart from Judith, whose economic situation improved, all the other participants mentioned changes in life circumstances that allowed them to have more time availability: less work hours due to changing jobs or diminishing workload (Anna, Tony), coupled with improvement of health and anxiety issues (Clara); less family care (Beth); graduating in a second, parallel degree (Aline); and a family health matter being resolved (John). Finally, some dropouts (Paul, Mar) mentioned they considered returning to their studies when and if their life (and time) circumstances changed.

Discussion

First, to sum up the main differences found between our profiles: stopouts were mostly part-time students, most of them females. For students who withdraw in the first

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semester, the likelihood of returning and staying is higher among women (Sánchez-Gelabert et al., 2020). Non-traditional stopouts took enrolment breaks mostly because of work conflicts leading to a failure to strike a balance between different commitments. However, there were no NTFT female stopouts, and few traditional learners. It was also difficult to find full-time dropouts, and we did not find any NTFT female dropouts. (Apart from that, there were few gender differences in our sample). While these student profiles represent small minorities at UOC, full-time students are more likely to have fewer external responsibilities (work and children) and to graduate, being less prone to dropout (Simpson, 2010).

Several students faced many transition difficulties, particularly the dropouts. Lack of preparedness and previous OHE experience, often combined with course/programme design characteristics (too many or overlapping assignments, course difficulty), generated severe strains upon students' engagement and time. New, unexperienced students are particularly prone to dropping out (Grau-Valldosera et al., 2018), especially from difficult courses (Wladis et al., 2014). First-year transition is most critical in shaping persistence decisions, but it can be especially challenging for online students (Henry, 2018). Getting adapted to the OHE model is thus likely to be more difficult for them, especially when they do not have previous OHE experience (Greenland & Moore, 2021), and impacts considerably their time-availability and persistence.

Students' unrealistic expectations were also reported as important issues, principally by dropouts. According to the literature, new-entry online students often take broad university messages that they can study when, what, and how they want, and that online learning is easier due to such flexibility (Hyllegard et al., 2008). That may generate misconceptions and inaccurate expectations, such as underestimation of time

demands and workload (Korstange et al., 2020), which later impact their time-availability, motivation, and performance. Students need a realistic understanding of the time commitments required to be successful (Veletsianos et al., 2021); accurate expectations and feasible goals facilitate student satisfaction and motivation during the critical first year (Henry, 2018). However, some students overestimated their own readiness, available time, and capacities. A good estimation of the time required to balance academic and professional obligations is a key factor that influences persistence and attrition in OHE (Lee & Choi, 2011). Therefore, comprehending and managing students' perceptions of their skills, time-availability, and expectations is crucial for their academic success.

In many reports, time-related issues were exacerbated by procrastination and poor time management, especially among NTPT learners. Time management is essential for persistence and successful e-learning (Lee & Choi, 2011). On the other hand, academic procrastination is strongly and negatively related to persistence and performance (Michinov et al., 2011). As OHE students are much more pressured to self-regulate their learning and independently plan and self-manage time (Broadbent & Poon, 2015), procrastination and cramming may impact their persistence even more. Most participants fell behind in their courses and, because of procrastination, poor planning, and conflictive commitments, considered withdrawing. When they failed courses and felt demotivated, such decision was strengthened. Indeed, retention is strongly informed by students' academic performance and satisfaction (Henry, 2018). However, a few students managed to change poor time management habits after stopping out. In contrast with other studies (Michinov et al., 2011), some even achieved success in their courses, despite procrastinating.

Time conflicts and time-pressure often caused important health and anxiety issues in non-traditional dropouts and female stopouts. Female first-year online students tend to experience more feelings of anxiety, and unpaid caring responsibilities and work-family-study conflicts are connected to higher levels of distress and likelihood of withdrawal (Waterhouse et al., 2020).

In the students' voices, the most important reason for their withdrawal falls under the umbrella of *life circumstances* (Lee & Choi, 2011): family, personal, and employment factors strongly connected to the learners' life context that deeply affect their available time and their learning journeys (Samra et al., 2021). Indeed, juggling study load with work and familial commitments is by far the most important challenge for first-year, non-traditional OHE students (Kara et al., 2019). Conflicts between work, studies, and family responsibilities are negatively related to academic achievement, and affect more the non-traditional female learners, who are more likely to be primary caregivers (Veletsianos et al., 2021). In our sample, male participants tended to feel less time-pressure and its effects, possibly because they had fewer family care commitments. However, unexpected life circumstances often played a crucial role – *situational factors* such as illness and unanticipated work and care changes increase the risk of dropout (Wladis et al., 2020). Therefore, negative social integration (Kember, 1999) – failing to integrate study demands with personal and professional life – appeared as the key factor for withdrawal. Thus, although time issues and lack of time are among the main dropout factors in the literature (Lee & Choi, 2011), for our students they were overwhelmingly the most important ones and appeared strongly correlated with stopout behaviour as well.

Figure 1 summarizes our findings as a temporal model, focusing on the studies and the main factors that affected student time and attrition in their first semester. The

first months and initial assessment activities are crucial for non-re-enrolment and heavily influenced by prior student factors (misconceptions, lack of preparedness, time poverty, and poor time management). As most new-entry students are already time-poor before commencing studies (Selwyn, 2011), with some being used to procrastinating, the time poverty and time management bars ‘begin’ before the first semester. These factors may be influenced by open-entry policies (allowing admission of unprepared students) and compounded by course/programme design (e.g., course and assessment difficulty). Such factors may induce failure in assessment activities, which is most influential for withdrawal. Several other issues also influence time conflicts and time-poverty – the main predictors for withdrawal - throughout the first semester; the main ones are life circumstances and balancing personal and professional life with studies (work/family/study commitments). Thus, time-related factors – the three grey bars - may ‘pile up’ upon the main time poverty bar, inducing severe time conflicts and pressure, and leading to withdrawal in the second semester.

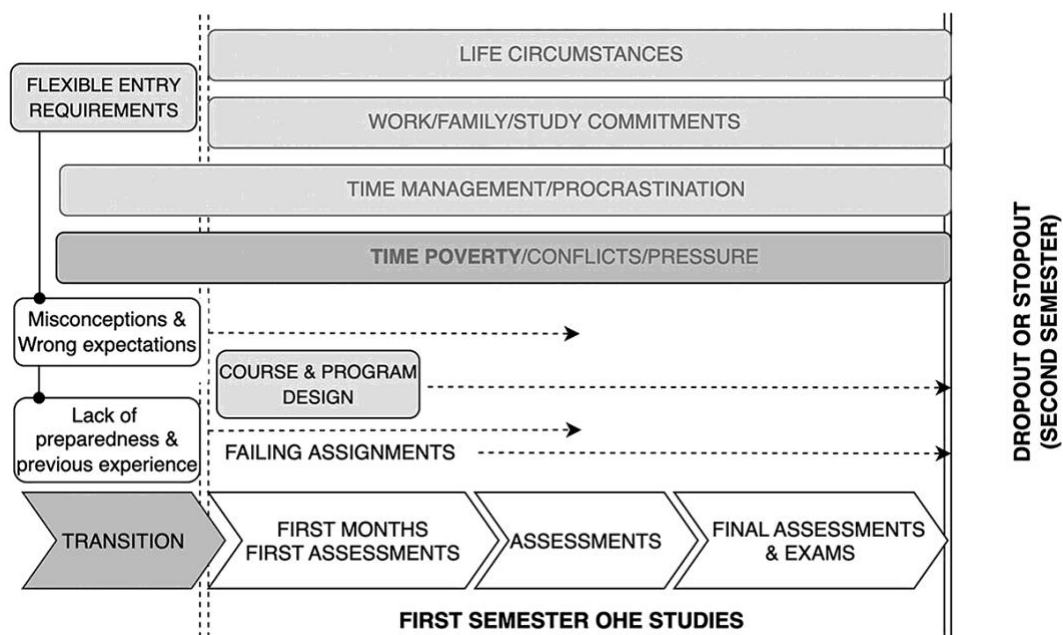


Figure 1. First-semester temporal model for time-factors and withdrawal.

In sum, time is a critical, constitutive context in which students are situated, and which permeates all aspects of their lived experience (Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2018). For most OHE learners, time is a scarce resource, which they struggle to consume and manage together with their studies – a factor McNeill (2010) identified as the economics of time use. Inspired by McNeill (2010), Figure 2 illustrates schematically the interactive life spheres that influenced students' experiences of time - their *life context* behind Figure 1, which focuses on their studies.

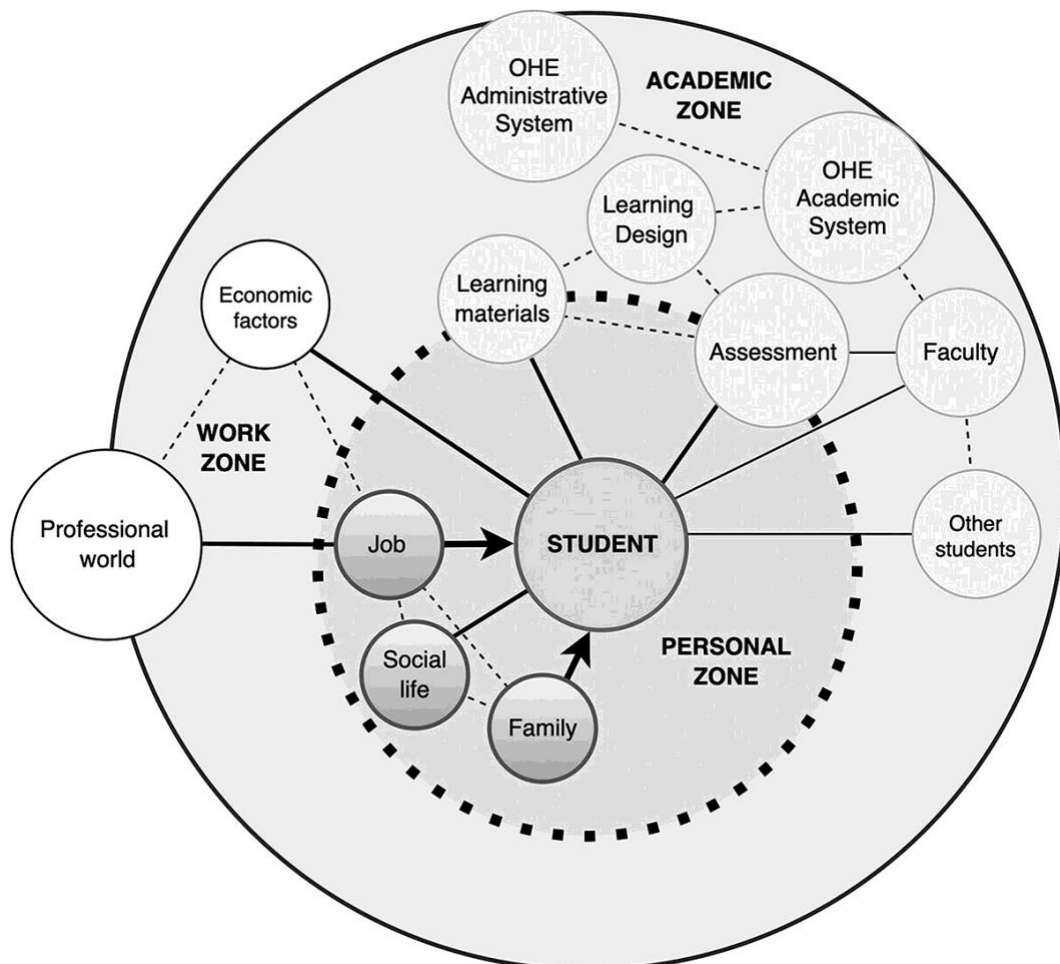


Figure 2. Student interactional network and lifeload.

Three main zones – personal, academic, and work-economic – compete for students' time commitment in their daily lives. The solid lines represent the main time demands and pressure. The distribution of time allocated to the different zones and their spheres affects the student's *lifeload*, the sum of all the time pressures a student faces in their life, which is a critical factor for persistence (Kahu et al., 2014). In the students' voices, their personal zone was their priority, while the academic zone was less relevant (McNeill, 2010). Thus time-related factors that produced too many conflicts with the personal zone (especially with family/work), building time-pressure within it and leaving scarce time for study, were the main reasons for the student deciding to withdraw. Noticeably, job and family care tended to require more time from NTPTs, particularly from female learners. Course/programme factors in the academic zone affect the student more directly through learning design/materials and assessment, often demanding unforeseen/unavailable time, which vies with demands from the personal zone. Competing priorities, particularly if derived from student and situational factors or unexpected commitments, jeopardize continuance and cause considerable stress (Henry, 2018). Education is usually the third priority, with work and family demands first (Selwyn, 2011). Faced with severe time conflicts in their struggle to integrate study into their daily lives, and having no external obligation to continue studying, students usually prioritise the personal zone (family/work) and eventually choose to abandon their studies.

Conclusions

Given the high dropout rates in OHE, and their likely increase in the future due to the online turn and the global pandemic, it is paramount to understand why students choose to withdraw in their foundational year, to prevent this phenomenon and foster retention.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and compare the experiences of time among dropout and stopout first-year online students, in their own voices.

Although we started with a very general question – ‘why did you decide to drop out or stop out?’ -, in the students’ perception time-related issues were the main factor behind their decisions, especially for the NTPTs – an experience that is likely representative of the overall student population at UOC. The time factor seems to be crucial in the first semester, particularly for dropout, and appeared connected mostly to student factors and situational barriers: their life circumstances, time management or procrastination, and unrealistic expectations – which were often influenced by a lack of previous OHE experience and academic preparedness. Programme and course factors that impacted time – course design and difficulty, continuous assessment, and programme routes – were mentioned less often by the stopouts. In most cases, when time poverty and time-related conflicts were felt as insurmountable, affecting deeply the student’s health and/or family/work commitments, they led to programme withdrawal. Stopouts gave varied reasons for their return to the studies: their life or work situation changed; or, profiting from their first semester experience, they felt they would be able to adjust their routines, course choice, and workload. But, in their first semester, they all suffered from the same ‘time afflictions’ as the dropouts. In sum, our study confirmed that the main self-reported explanation for the decisions not to re-enrol or to leave the university is *time* – but the factors that influence time are complex and often interrelated with other rationales (motivation, engagement, lack of skills, course difficulty, etc.). Given the exploratory nature of this study, we cannot ascertain whether these findings are different for face-to-face-only students or not; but in the OHE students’ voices, time challenges were certainly the major withdrawal factor for them – even for traditional and full-time learners.

As for recommendations to foster persistence, time issues should therefore guide course and programme design (paying particular attention to calibrating workload and pace of learning), specialized academic advisory services (especially for new students during induction and enrolment, and throughout the first year, to prevent unrealistic expectations and set achievable goals), personalized and proactive support (e.g., to non-traditional students with job and/or family commitments), and interventions (e.g., to improve time management and organizational skills, offering planning tools and strategies) (Samra et al., 2021). While broad life circumstances – the main factor affecting students’ time-challenges and withdrawal – are hardly amenable to institutional interventions, the latter should try to ameliorate their impact, perhaps via flexibilizing assessment and progression routes (Xavier & Meneses, 2021). Future research could explore comparatively such time-related experiences with cohorts from different programmes, compare them with the experiences of persistent students, and further investigate effective time-focused interventions to foster success.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A

Guidance questions for the interview (translated from the original language)

Some examples (summarised) of interview questions:

- Why and when did you decide not to re-enrol? Did your reasons have to do with time?
- Can you describe a typical week for you during your first semester? Did you manage to balance the studies with your personal, familial, and working life? How?
- How much time did you expect to dedicate to the studies, before starting them?
- Was such an expectation correct? Or did the studies demand more than you expected? Did technological issues influence this matter in any way?
- How do you evaluate your time management abilities? And what strategies did you use to manage your time and reconcile your studies with the rest of your life?
- Procrastination – did you procrastinate in your first semester? Did it become a problem? Why? And what were the causes, in your opinion?
- Did you feel pressure or anxiety in your first semester? Did it have to do with time or not?
- If you felt pressure and anxiety, how did this whole situation affect your health?
- (In the case of stopouts): Why and how did you manage to return to the university after taking a break? What changed?
- (In the case of dropouts): Have you thought about returning to your studies and re-enrolling?