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*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

Xavier, M., & Meneses, J. (2020). *Dropout in online higher education: A scoping review from 2014 to 2018*. Barcelona: eLearn Center, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10609/114826

## 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)

Arksey, H. & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 8*(1),19-32. doi:10.1080/1364557032000119616

# 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

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

**Definitions and concepts**

Examples of definitions: Dropout

| Dropout | n | % | Shared characteristics/Selected references |
|---|---|---|---|
| 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).<br>• 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).<br>• Others mentioned course or program (Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017; Yukselturk, Ozekes, & Türel, 2014), or course or institution (Sanz, Vírseda, García, & 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**