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The online PhD dropout: Narratives and meanings of withdrawal

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The online PhD dropout: Narratives and meanings of withdrawal

Online doctoral dropout is a persistent yet largely overlooked issue by institutions and researchers. This qualitative study investigated the candidates' circumstances leading to withdrawal, its emotional repercussions, and subsequent academic trajectories. We conducted in-depth interviews with ten former part-time online PhD students and employed thematic analysis to identify dominant narratives of withdrawal. Findings showed three narratives: reluctance, grief, and relief. Reluctant dropouts perceived themselves as "being dropped out" and were more inclined to complete their doctorates in the future due to sustained motivation. Grieving dropouts experienced frustration and guilt, still processing a painful experience. Relieved dropouts viewed leaving the PhD as the right decision considering their circumstances and were ready to move forward in their lives. We argue that online doctoral dropout is polysemic and should not be automatically equated to the final chapter of the doctoral trajectory. Recommendations for institutions include implementing exit interviews, follow-up procedures, and re-engagement paths.

Keywords: online PhD programs; part-time PhD students; qualitative research; retention; dropout

Introduction

In recent years, doctoral education has experienced significant growth worldwide (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022, p. 38). This growth has been accompanied by increasing diversity among PhD candidates in terms of age, gender, class, and ethnic background (UK Council for Graduate Education, 2023), and a tendency to migrate towards hybrid and online modalities (Lee, 2022). Nevertheless, dropout remains a persistent reality in doctoral studies. For decades, PhD students have left their degrees at an overall rate of 50% (Groenvynck et al., 2013; Wollast et al., 2023), with studies ranging estimates from 30% to 70% depending on the fields and countries (Cornér et al., 2023; van Rooij et al., 2021; Zahl, 2015). The social sciences and humanities (Castelló et al.,

2017), and the online modalities (Hunt, 2020) tend to be at the upper end of this range. Withdrawing from a doctorate is frequently a taxing experience for candidates, both emotionally and in terms of their career prospects (Alves et al., 2023). Concurrently, institutions lose an asset, since a significant portion of their research output is generated by PhD students—around one-third, according to Belavy et al. (2020).

Despite this seemingly bleak scenario, it is important to acknowledge that not all dropout is preventable by institutions or undesirable for candidates. In the broader context of higher education, Harvey et al. (2017) argue that a significant portion of student attrition “is either unpredictable or inevitable” (p. 9), as many reasons for withdrawal lie outside institutional control. Although equivalent research on attrition and re-recruitment is lacking in doctoral studies, similar patterns may exist in this context, considering the persistently high dropout rates (Leijen et al., 2016). Furthermore, the current academic landscape offers no shortage of reasons to withdraw from a prospective career in academia (Firth, 2022; Kis et al., 2022). Early-career researchers face intense competition, low wages, uncertain career prospects, and what recent literature has characterized as a mental health crisis (Naumann et al., 2022). Additionally, following an academic path can also be less appealing for non-traditional doctoral students. These are mature individuals who often pursue a doctoral degree part-time and at a distance while juggling responsibilities from their paid jobs and families (Lee, 2022; Offerman, 2011). With already established careers, non-traditional candidates sometimes seek a PhD for personal growth or to advance in their current career.

In any case, there is a segment of doctoral dropout for which institutions can undeniably play a preventive role. Institutions have a duty of care for their students in areas where they can make a difference, such as support systems and supervision (Kis et al., 2022). This becomes even more important in online doctoral programs, since its advantages, in terms of easy access, flexible study schedules, and satisfactory learning outcomes (Torka, 2021), often come at a cost. This cost has to do with a sense of isolation, compromised supervision, less satisfaction, and increased dropout rates (Kozar & Lum, 2017; Melián et al., 2023; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). The online student body still craves some synchronous and face-to-face interaction to enhance their doctoral experience. Recent research (Stapleford & Lee, 2024; Torka, 2021), however, has called for overcoming the *deficit* model that places

online delivery as second best, emphasizing the increasingly blurred boundaries between modalities and the primacy of meaningful interactions over their medium of delivery.

Doctoral schools pay little attention to students who drop out. These students vanish from the academic landscape leaving no trace. Typically, no exit interviews or follow-ups are conducted, and there are no tracks for re-recruitment. This neglect is unfortunate because, as Harvey et al. (2017) noted, "unlike attrition, re-recruitment is an area of high elasticity" (p. 6), and by opening possibilities for non-linear doctoral trajectories, institutions could have a notable impact at a low cost. In this sense, these authors found that, in higher education, half of those who dropped out reintegrated within eight years, concluding that "much attrition is inevitable but not final" (p. 6).

Researchers have mainly examined doctoral dropout through a quantitative lens, focusing on identifying demographic characteristics of candidates and contextual or personal factors that increase the risk of non-completion. Among demographic characteristics, studies have noted an increased risk of dropout for learners who are unfunded (Larcombe et al., 2021; Wollast et al., 2023), studying in the fields of social sciences and humanities (Jaksztat et al., 2021), female (Castelló et al., 2017), particularly mothers (Jaksztat et al., 2021), and studying part-time and online (Fang & Zhan, 2021). Factors linked to heightened dropout risk include relational factors such as poor supervision (Belavy et al., 2020; Jaksztat et al., 2021) and a weak peer community (Castelló et al., 2017; Peltonen et al., 2017); contextual factors such as financial difficulties (Larcombe et al., 2021; Sakurai et al., 2012) or work/life balance challenges (Castelló et al., 2017; Kis et al., 2022); and personal factors such as mental health problems (Larcombe et al., 2021), often related to excessive workload (van Rooij et al., 2021), or student ability (Wollast et al., 2018). Furthermore, quantitative papers have emphasized the critical nature of the first two years of the doctorate in students' adjustment (Fang & Zhan, 2021; Hunt, 2020), despite most attrition occurring from the second year onwards, during the research-intensive stage of the PhD (Bekova, 2021; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

Fewer studies have gathered doctoral dropouts' narratives from a qualitative perspective. This scholarship has stressed aspects connected to withdrawal, such as disengagement processes (Alves et al., 2023), a sense of stagnation in a non-significant project (Devos et al., 2017), inadequate skills or lack of interest, along with supervisory,

financial, and institutional factors (Leijen et al., 2016); and, again, issues related to supervision and personal factors such as low self-efficacy or changing life goals (Maher et al., 2020). Finally, in the only study we could locate that explored reasons for withdrawal among former online candidates (Hunt, 2020), the factors cited were unsupportive supervisors, insufficient time, and a perception that completing the program was not worth the time or effort.

Globally, the reviewed literature on doctoral dropout shows several shortcomings. Quantitative research has provided a rich but mainly descriptive constellation of factors, with limited examination of their interplay, context, or embodiment in the student experience and trajectory. Conversely, qualitative inquiries have largely overlooked providing an immersive understanding of the subjective withdrawal experience across its entire unfolding.

Aim and context of the study

This study explores the lived experiences of online doctoral students withdrawing from their PhD programs, employing a sequential perspective. Existing research has barely delved into the experiences of doctoral students who choose to drop out, and even less so in the context of online programs. Furthermore, scholarship has mainly focused on perceived reasons for withdrawal, taking isolated snapshots of the situation. This approach fails to capture the globality of the experience from the student's perspective; its longitudinal richness from the first arising thoughts of leaving to the enduring aftereffects in personal and academic terms. Accordingly, given the increasing relevance of fully online doctoral programs and the pervasive nature of the dropout phenomenon, this paper seeks to explore the experiences of doctoral students dropping out from their PhD programs. Specifically, we aim to understand the emotional repercussions of the experience and the students' academic paths after withdrawal.

The research was conducted at a Spanish open university offering nine PhD programs across the fields of social sciences, humanities, and technical areas. All doctoral programs are taught in English. At the time of the study, 195 students were enrolled across the university's PhD programs. Most of them are part-time, fully online students, comprising 79% of the student body (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, 2023), who conduct their research unfunded while carrying on with their professional and personal lives. They are expected to complete

their dissertations in five years, with possible extensions on justified grounds. In the first two years, candidates must complete a few compulsory courses before dedicating themselves to fieldwork and thesis writing. The university's latest available dropout figures for its main doctoral program are 24% (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, 2018). This rate is relatively low compared to those reported in the international literature (Wollast et al., 2023), though not entirely unheard of (Cornér et al., 2023).

Methodology

Design and participants

This was a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews conducted at a single higher education institution. In this sense, single-case studies are well-suited to gaining a deep understanding of complex phenomena in their natural settings (Yin, 2002). As for the sampling strategy, we utilized a maximum variation approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009) to ensure that the study captured a wide range of perspectives and experiences from former online doctoral students, encompassing various programs, countries, ages, and time elapsed since their last enrolment.

Table 1 provides information about the participant demographics. The sample comprised 10 former candidates from two online doctoral programs in the social sciences: Education and ICT (n = 6) and Information and Knowledge Society (n = 4). While the university has incorporated several new programs in recent years, Education and ICT and Information and Knowledge Society are the oldest. Consequently, our participants, who left their PhDs in previous years, come from these two programs. Participants were enrolled in their respective programs for a duration ranging from 3 semesters to a maximum of 20, with a mean of 7 semesters (SD = 6). At the time of the interviews, a mean of 10 years had elapsed since their last enrolment (SD = 5). Regarding gender distribution, the sample leaned towards women (60%). The mean age of the sample was 52 years (SD = 10). Geographically, five participants resided in Europe (Spain and Greece), four in Latin America (Paraguay, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica), and one in Asia (Azerbaijan).

Table 1

Participant Demographics (n=10)

Pseudonym	Residence	Gender	Age	PhD Program	Semesters Enrolled	Years
Sophia	Greece	F	32	Information and Knowledge Society	3	2018–2019
Juan	Spain	M	45	Education and ICT	3	2017–2019
María	Paraguay	F	66	Information and Knowledge Society	20	2003–2013
Pedro	Spain	M	54	Education and ICT	4	2014–2016
Ismael	Chile	M	64	Education and ICT	14	2010–2017
Valentina	Colombia	F	52	Education and ICT	4	2015–2017
Thomas	Azerbaijan	M	51	Education and ICT	3	2017–2019
Gabriela	Costa Rica	F	59	Information and Knowledge Society	4	2006–2008
Rosa	Spain	F	55	Information and Knowledge Society	8	2018–2022
Laia	Spain	F	46	Education and ICT	10	2011–2016

Data collection and analysis

Once we obtained approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee, with the assistance of the Doctoral School, we sent invitations to participate in the study to all former doctoral students listed as non-completers or dropouts in the official records. Between 2000 and 2023, 148 individuals were identified in this category. Initially, 12 of them expressed interest to participate, but only 10 progressed to the interview stage, with the remaining two being unresponsive to follow-up communications. Before conducting the interviews, we provided participants with comprehensive information about the interview process, including its structure and topics, as well as details about confidentiality, data handling, and the right to withdraw. All participants signed an informed consent form. The interview guide covered various aspects of the doctoral withdrawal process, including the initial contemplation of leaving, the reasons for withdrawal, triggers, negotiations with advisors and administration, emotional and academic impacts, reflection on the decision, and future expectations. Interviews were conducted online from November 2022 to January 2023 and were recorded with the

participants' consent, each lasting from 50 to 70 minutes. Follow-up questions to clarify key aspects discussed were sent via email to two participants.

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, we utilized Atlas.ti 23 software to code them. The strategy to coding was mainly inductive, paying attention to the learners' experiences and the processual logic of events. The resulting set of codes was revisited frequently to avoid overlap and discard the ones deemed irrelevant. From the onset of the interviews and through the whole coding process, the authors took field notes that contributed to the ongoing analysis and theme development. To guide the analysis, we employed a thematic analysis approach within a critical realist theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 169; Braun et al., 2014). This orientation fitted our intent of capturing the experiences of the participants as lived and described by them. Accordingly, it privileges inductive coding and a semantic interpretation of their discourses, although the final themes involve a more interpretative approach based on the patterned meanings expressed by participants. Throughout the development of the research, the authors held several meetings to question assumptions, build a shared understanding, and discuss code and theme development.

Findings

In the following sections, we will first discuss general considerations that help establish the overarching framework of our participants' experiences of withdrawal, and then explore the main narratives derived from the interviews.

Dropping out from an online PhD program is a multi-faceted process with long-lasting effects

Becoming officially classified as a dropout in an online doctoral program is a one-time administrative event. At a specific point in time, our participants received a communication from the university notifying them that they were no longer doctoral students and that they would be unable to enroll for the next semester. However, the academic, relational, and personal process that leads to withdrawal is a much broader phenomenon characterized by a nuanced and often messy sequence of events. According to our participants' accounts, it

encompassed everything from the initial thoughts of leaving that eventually became recurrent, to the actual trigger that made the student realize the project was no longer viable, the administrative process that followed, and the subsequent repercussions on both academic and personal fronts.

The perceived reasons for dropping out from their online doctoral studies fell into two broad categories. The first one was supervisory relationships. Six participants reported insufficient supervision as the main reason for withdrawing. In these cases, a hyper-busy, hands-off supervisor who gave excessive and premature autonomy while providing little accompaniment and specific feedback was to blame. The flipside of a deteriorating supervisory relationship concerned the students themselves, particularly their lack of will or skills to receive, handle, and act on the supervisors' feedback. Such was the case of Pedro and Ismael, who also conceded that being mature professionals with experience in academic jobs did not contribute to having the humility and trust in their supervisors' advice needed to move forward in their projects.

The second category of reasons referred to challenges in balancing doctoral studies with a demanding full-time job and caregiving responsibilities, coupled with unforeseen life events. Four participants cited these factors as the leading causes of their withdrawal. Changing work conditions, recent motherhood, or the will to avoid burnout were among the specific reasons mentioned. Furthermore, a few online candidates also pointed out administrative issues (María and Gabriela), unforeseen health problems (Rosa), financial constraints (Sophia), or isolation (Thomas) as contributing circumstances to their withdrawal from the doctorate.

Next, we will discuss the three dominant narratives present in the former candidates' discourses. These narratives of doctoral withdrawal encompass a range of perceptions, lingering emotional aftereffects, and the potential for future re-engagement with the doctoral pursuit, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

The Narratives of Withdrawal from an Online PhD

Narrative	Emotional Aftereffects	Representative Quote	Future Expectations	Likelihood of Re-enrolment in Another Program
Reluctance	Having been “dropped out” Mutual abandonment Sense of unfairness	“Actually, I didn’t quit. I was working hard. It was my supervisors who decided not to continue with my project. After several back-and-forth, they gave up.” (María)	Continuing with the project, in one way or another, due to sustained motivation.	High
Grief	Frustration Guilt Sense of failure	“I feel frustrated when people ask me why I dropped out of the PhD program. The PhD program was very important to me, and it is a thorn that I still carry with me.” (Ismael)	Recovering from the painful experience and then assessing if the motivation to pursue a PhD is still there.	Medium
Relief	Feeling liberated Proud on the intent Not feeling a failure	"The PhD was becoming an increasingly significant problem for me. At that moment, [dropping out] meant a lot of relief, it was like taking a huge weight off my shoulders." (Juan)	Moving on with their lives after the doctoral experience.	Low

The relieved dropout

The prevailing sentiment among four of our participants was that, instead of them leaving the doctorate, it was the doctorate that had left them. They were on the institutional list of doctoral students who left the program, but their doctoral project remained a life project in which they kept heavily invested. Grit and a rekindled sense of personal vocation after dropping out from the PhD program were the drivers of their commitment, as the following excerpts illustrate:

My mother taught me that what you start, you finish. Completing the doctorate was my obsession. After having built a career throughout my entire life and achieving top grades in everything I've done, was I not going to finish the thesis? (María)

A while ago, I told myself, “I am going to finish my research independently. Because that's my job, it's my training.” I'm not interested in academic politics, but I want to dedicate myself to something I truly enjoy, and it turns out that what I enjoy is what I was already doing in the PhD. (Valentina)

They found themselves out of the program for various reasons, ranging from challenging supervisory relationships (María, Rosa) to seemingly unsolvable administrative problems (Gabriela) or just progressive disengagement and academic inaction (Valentina). However, a shared perception was the surprise at the lack of any administrative contact whatsoever following the email communicating the withdrawal from the program. Our participants acknowledged that, with more follow-up and flexibility, they would have probably persisted.

Given that some years have passed since they left the doctoral program we are examining, we can trace the trajectory of these participants after dropping out. Eventually, María, 20 years after initially enrolling in the PhD under study, completed it at another university. Gabriela also retook the doctorate at a university in her home country after a ten-year pause, and she is already foreseeing the submission of the dissertation. At the time of the interview, Valentina had resumed work on her project, was advancing independently, and contemplated re-enrolling eventually in another institution. Finally, Rosa, as a recent dropout, has no specific plans but shared that eventually, she would love to finish her PhD.

The grieving dropout

Similarly to the reluctant dropouts, three participants in our study also felt that the closure of their academic records, marking their newfound *dropout* academic status, was either unforeseen, too sudden, or outright unfair. However, for this group, the withdrawal process and its repercussions are experienced with a more pronounced grieving flavor. They feel more ambivalent about their doctoral experience; the pain persists, and the wounds are still lingering. Ismael, whose last enrolment was already six years ago, illustrates this perception:

It remains a deeply emotional experience. It was a great experience for me to go through the academic journey, and perhaps that's why I've lived it as a form of

mourning. It's like a loved one that you must let go of at some point. It was beautiful, but it's over now...

For both Pedro and Ismael, methodological controversies with their supervisors progressively eroded mutual trust and, in turn, the viability of the PhD project. In an unusual exercise of self-criticism and reflection, both hold themselves partially accountable for the failed relationship due to the way they handled their supervisors' feedback. In this sense, Ismael draws a parallel: "When doctors get sick, they are terrible patients. I wasn't a good student because I was already an academic." Pedro, also an academic, ponders that he "probably lacked a bit of humility" and that "ego issues" might have influenced "skipping the agreements" with his supervisors, which eventually led to the breakup.

Indeed, this is the group that more clearly exhibits the mediation of psychological variables in the doctoral withdrawal process. The recollection of the experience elicited feelings of inadequacy and self-deprecation. For instance, Pedro was left with the feeling "of not being enough for this model," while "harsh feedback" coming from both his supervisor and a journal reviewer made Ismael "depressed" and think, "Is there anything good at all in what I do?" In a different vein, Thomas lamented being "too patient" and unresponsive with an otherwise absent and simultaneously unreasonably demanding supervisor in terms of publications.

As is the case with any other mourning period, it takes time to heal from a challenging withdrawal from a PhD. It is only after this period concludes that former candidates will assess whether the intrinsic motivation, crucial in initially fueling their doctoral pursuit, still exists. Perhaps due to this ongoing emotional reconciliation process, participants in this group were the most ambivalent about the likelihood of reengaging with their doctoral projects in the future.

The relieved dropout

Quitting any venture is often connoted negatively and equated with failure in prevalent societal attitudes. Even more so when it comes to a PhD, with its strong gatekeeping barriers, hyper-specialized focus, and ambitious prospects. For three of our participants, though, leaving the PhD simply did not feel this way. Juan, Sophia, and Laia felt mainly freed and

relieved from a burden that they had been carrying for far too long. For them, withdrawal was an *enabler*; now they could devote themselves to other endeavors that were more aligned with their current values and life circumstances. As Juan graphically illustrates:

The PhD was becoming an increasingly significant problem for me. At that moment, dropping out meant a lot of relief, it was like taking a huge weight off my shoulders. My wife would say, “Let it go! You're not getting anywhere...” I shed a lot of burden and left happy; at no point was it a frustration.

Juan finally decided to quit after the summer break. It was not uncommon among participants in this study to reevaluate whether the PhD still fit within the rest of their lives during a pause in their regular activities. For Sophia, it was also post-vacation that she confronted the fact that her job was so emotionally taxing that it did not leave any room for proper doctoral study. Additionally, the recent death of a relative ignited for Laia a process of recalibration of what was worthy (and manageable) for her at that point in her life. This process eventually led her to prioritize taking care of herself and other family members over what she perceived as a high-effort, low-reward doctoral race.

The general sense for these participants was that the doctoral pursuit felt like a closed chapter in their lives. From then on, they wanted to devote their limited time to other areas, such as spending more time with their families or focusing on their professional careers. Notwithstanding, they were proud of the intent and maintained a positive outlook on their doctoral experiences, which they regarded as highly formative and profitable. In this sense, the PhD opened Laia up to “another level of thinking about reality” and contributed to enhancing her managerial job. Sophia highlighted how fulfilling it was to immerse herself in the academic atmosphere during conferences, while Juan stressed the growth and maturity this challenging experience had brought about.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experience of withdrawing from an online doctorate and the meanings associated with it among ten former candidates, adopting a retrospective stance. We identified three main narratives associated with the dropout experience. The first was characterized by reluctance, ambivalence, and a sense of institutional abandonment. The

second narrative was marked by a grieving process, frustration, and loss. The third was related to the relief of being free from a long-held burden, enabling the individual to move on with their life. The findings of the study raise several questions that we discuss next.

First, dropout is polysemic. It means different things to different people or even to the same person at different stages. Countering the conventional narrative, our *relieved* participants showed that online PhD withdrawal is not necessarily a negative or undesirable event. They envisioned achieving a better work-life balance and, quite often, leaving behind problematic supervisory relationships after dropping out. These participants' accounts somehow echo academic *quit lit*, a recent popular genre that, through personal stories of academic withdrawal, highlights toxic tendencies of competitiveness and self-imposed abuse characteristic of the current casualized academic landscape (McKenzie, 2021).

However, for other study participants, those we have called *grieving* and, to a lesser extent, our *reluctant* participants, perceptions of the withdrawal process were more in line with the conventional narrative. For the *grieving* participants, a sense of institutional or supervisory abandonment leading to what they viewed as an unfair administrative dropout condition was the most prominent felt experience so far. Harvey found that students withdrawing from higher education “are often demoralized or stigmatized by their experience” (p. 14), while Alves et al. (2023) remark that “PhD candidates who withdrew may experience a decrease in self-esteem and self-confidence, a sense of personal failure, disappointment, or depression” (p. 1). We found pieces of all these elements in our participants' testimonials. Dropping out was an emotionally taxing experience for them, but more than feeling “stigmatized” by others, the main dynamic at play was one of internalizing guilt, otherwise a common phenomenon observed among doctoral students (Tröster & Van Quaquebeke, 2021).

The second argument derived from the study is that dropout is often not the final chapter of the part-time online doctoral trajectory. Alves et al. (2023) point out that research usually places withdrawal “in an end-of-the-cycle position” (p. 13). This approach leaves ample sections of the PhD dropout phenomenon invisibilized and unexplored. In our study, three of our ten participants had re-enrolled, continued with their doctoral project independently, or contemplated re-engagement at some point in the future. The main reason for this was that withdrawal did not cease their intimate commitment to the doctoral project

as a personal pursuit. Additionally, and somehow paradoxically, they often had fond memories of the online doctorate and the institution globally.

In alignment with our findings, Harvey et al. (2017) noted how academic "pathways are non-linear, with many students already moving in and out of higher education over time. There are few 'dropouts', but many partial completers, stop-outs, alumni and lifelong learners" (p. 7). These observations are especially true for non-traditional doctoral students, such as our participants. For these learners, it is common for life to get in the way of their doctoral commitment. For instance, our participants faced unanticipated family caregiving responsibilities, job dismissals, health issues, or particularly complex recent motherhood situations. Recognizing these complexities, Firth (2022) emphasizes the need for supervisors, candidates, and institutions to have honest conversations about withdrawal, what may happen next, and what could be done about it. However, our participants rarely engaged in such discussions, more commonly experiencing a gradual decline in both supervisory relationships and involvement with the institution.

The third main argument relates to the crucial mediation of psychological factors in how students cope with the withdrawal experience. Literature on doctoral dropout has frequently discussed whether personal factors (Devos et al., 2017; Litalien & Guay, 2015; Shin et al., 2022) or institutional factors (Hunt, 2020; Peltonen et al., 2017; van Rooij et al., 2021) were the key drivers of withdrawal, often reaching conflicting conclusions. In this regard, our participants articulated both types of reasons for withdrawal. Contextual factors were primarily linked to poor, hands-off supervision styles and unresponsive administration. Personal challenges were linked to the struggle of maintaining a work-study-life balance. However, it is noteworthy that none of these factors emerged as distinctly dominant, indicating a complex interplay between personal and institutional influences.

Despite literature raising concerns over the reliability of self-reported reasons and the potential for externalizing blame to conceal personal shortcomings (Fullick, 2013; Hunt, 2020; Xavier et al., 2022), we did not view this as a significant issue. Our participants showed a blend of external attribution, focusing on supervisors and administration, along with a significant amount of introspection and self-criticism. Since supervision is fundamentally a relationship, its shortcomings cannot be attributed solely to the supervisor. This was evident in two of our participants acknowledging their lack of humility in accepting

and acting on the supervisor's feedback, limited skills, or reactive behavior as contributing factors to their withdrawal. In any event, beyond reasons and probably unsolvable context vs. personal controversies, our results showed that personal agency and a proactive coping style matter, often making the difference, for example, in the face of similar supervisory neglect. Relatedly, several studies (Alves et al., 2023; Litalien & Guay, 2015; van Rooij et al., 2021) have utilized self-determination theory to uphold how the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness affects persistence in doctoral studies. This framework resonates with our findings, bringing together both contextual and personal factors. It avoids solely attributing withdrawal to individual shortcomings, as depicted in the "trial by fire" discourse (Fullick, 2013), while also acknowledging institutional and supervisory accountability in addressing the basic needs of PhD candidates.

The last argument drawn from this study is that contingent life circumstances were often behind decisions to withdraw from the online PhD among these non-traditional candidates. Literature has documented the challenges faced by mature-aged professionals pursuing a part-time online doctoral degree, particularly in managing time constraints and juggling various work, study, and family-related roles and responsibilities (Lee, 2022; Melián & Meneses, 2024). This demographic is more susceptible to these factors compared to younger, face-to-face doctoral students. The logical progression of these findings is evident in our participants' dropout experiences. Job-related factors such as being overworked, experiencing burnout, or facing redundancy; family-related considerations like unexpected caregiving responsibilities or the challenges of recent motherhood; and broader life circumstances such as worsening health conditions or relocations played substantial roles in their decisions to withdraw.

Limitations and Further Research

Being a single-case study qualitative research, an obvious limitation of this study is its small sample size centered in a single institution. The results are thus not representative of the wider online doctoral population. However, some of its results are likely to be transferable (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 143) to similar contexts in terms of institutions and demographics. Additionally, our sample was culturally and geographically diverse.

Another potential limitation of the study is the likelihood of sample bias. The sample may be skewed because individuals who are more active or inclined to scrutinize the university or their former supervisors may be more likely to participate. However, to the contrary, we add a valuable contribution to the literature, since dropout candidates constitute a hard-to-reach population generally reluctant to share their stories.

Research on students who drop out from online doctoral programs is still in its early stages. In this study, we delved into general themes related to this population. However, by gathering testimonies from former candidates in the Global South, we uncovered cultural differences and occasional perceptions of discrimination. Testimonies from mothers also highlighted their challenging experiences, adding complexity to their doctoral withdrawal trajectories. Thus, further exploration by researchers is needed to understand the impact of ethnicity, age, gender, caregiving responsibilities, and discrimination related to these variables on the experience of dropping out of online PhD programs.

Conclusions

Just as lives are not linear, neither are personal and academic trajectories after withdrawal from an online PhD. This study identified three types of narratives among former candidates from a Spanish open university: reluctance, grief, and relief. The dominant narrative in each person was associated with various meanings that shaped the post-withdrawal emotional experience and modulated future expectations and the likelihood of an eventual re-enrolment. Participants frequently experienced dropping out from their online doctorates as an unpleasant episode plagued by feelings of unfairness, frustration, and failure. However, contrary to the mainstream narrative, sometimes quitting the PhD was seen as appropriate and even an empowering experience in the context of the person's circumstances. Remarkably, a few participants, after undergoing the dropout experience under study, eventually completed their PhD studies at another university. Considering all these elements, we argue that doctoral dropout is polysemic and should be preferably regarded as provisional rather than the conclusive stage of the online doctoral journey.

Despite being a pervasive phenomenon in online doctoral programs, dropout is often invisible. Academic literature on this group of research learners is painfully scarce, and candidates typically exit their doctorates silently, without any institutional inquiry or follow-

up. Although not all dropout is preventable, in some scenarios, universities can have an impact. Yet, the lack of student feedback and institutional inquiry into this phenomenon makes it challenging for universities, supervisors, and current students alike to gain an accurate understanding of the online doctoral dropout experience and develop strategies for improvement.

This paper contributes to the understanding of online doctoral dropouts. Consequently, we offer several recommendations for practice. Before withdrawal, universities should establish an environment that is sensitive and responsive to the needs of non-traditional candidates, recognizing their complex circumstances and valuing their academic contributions. This entails promoting students' academic integration through formal and informal support structures and effectively disseminating information about available options. Regarding supervision, institutions should facilitate an informed initial matching process, provide an independent mediator role (ombudsperson) when conflicts arise, and streamline and formalize the process of changing supervisors when necessary. After withdrawal occurs, it is important for institutions to actively gather information about these individuals by conducting exit interviews and maintaining follow-up contact. On a broader scale, universities should not only understand the reasons behind doctoral students' withdrawals but also facilitate pathways for doctoral re-engagement.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Data supporting this study are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Personal Data

- a) How old are you?
- b) Which doctoral program did you enroll in?
- c) In what year did you start your doctoral program?
- d) What is your gender identity?

Background

- 1) Can you describe your motivations for initially pursuing a doctorate?
- 2) What did you hope to achieve through your doctoral studies?

Dropout Process

- 3) When did you first start considering leaving your doctoral program?
- 4) What were the primary reasons that led you to contemplate dropping out?
- 5) Can you describe any specific events or moments that triggered your decision to leave the program?
- 6) Please walk me through the entire process of leaving the program, from the moment you first contacted someone about it until you definitively left. How did you negotiate this decision?
- 7) How did you feel in the weeks and months after leaving the program?
- 8) What impact did dropping out have on your life and on yourself personally?
- 9) How do you evaluate that decision now, with the benefit of hindsight?
- 10) If you could speak to your past self at the moment of dropping out, what would you say?

Future Perspectives and Recommendations

- 11) What are your expectations for the future regarding your academic or professional career?
- 12) What recommendations would you give to the institution or supervisors based on your experience?

13) In your opinion, what support or resources were lacking that might have helped you continue your studies?

14) Do you believe that you didn't fit into the doctoral program, or that the system didn't work for you? Please explain.

Closing

15) Is there anything else related to your experience of dropping out that you'd like to share that we haven't covered?