FOSTERING EQUITY IN RURAL EDUCATION: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON STUDENT DROPOUT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to analyze the causes of student dropout in rural universities. The objective was to understand a complex phenomenon that represents a major obstacle to development and equal opportunities in the rural educational context.

Theoretical framework: Different scientific publications were reviewed in all the academic platforms with the highest impact in the scientific field. This allowed the researchers to broaden their knowledge and, ultimately, to deepen their understanding of the subject studied in this work.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The methodology of the study included a documentary review, with content analysis as the main strategy. The databases Scopus, Redalyc, SciELO Dialnet and Google Scholar were used, with specific inclusion criteria related to the period of publication, type of study, languages and availability in open format.

Findings: The data found revealed that university dropout occurs due to various situations, such as individual and socioeconomic factors, geographic and access barriers, quality of education and available resources. In addition, cultural and social aspects, and sometimes the lack of empathy on the part of authorities, professors and peers, cause university dropouts.

Social, practical and research implications: The study has important implications for understanding and reducing dropout in the rural university context, which will have implications for areas such as education, policy and social development.

Originality/value: It is crucial that education policy makers and university institutions work in a coordinated manner to design comprehensive strategies tailored to the specific needs of each rural community. Continued research and analysis of the elements that influence dropout will identify new opportunities for improvement and

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ensure equitable access to higher education. This will contribute to the academic, professional and social development of rural students and strengthen the educational fabric of these regions. Taken together, these suggestions aim to strengthen student retention and provide equitable educational opportunities in rural areas, thus contributing to greater equality of opportunity and the integral development of these communities.

Keywords: Dropout, University Students, Higher Education, Rural Education.

PROMOVENDO A EQUIDADE NA EDUCAÇÃO RURAL: UMA REVISÃO DA LITERATURA SOBRE ESTRATÉGIAS DE EVASÃO E RETENÇÃO DE ALUNOS

RESUMO

Objetivo: O objetivo do estudo foi analisar as causas da evasão estudantil nas universidades rurais. Assim sendo, visou-se compreender um fenômeno complexo que representa um importante obstáculo ao desenvolvimento e à igualdade de oportunidades no contexto educacional rural.

Enquadramento teórico: Foram analisadas diferentes publicações científicas em todas as plataformas acadêmicas de maior impacto na área científica. Isso permitiu que os pesquisadores ampliassem seus conhecimentos e, em última instância, se aprofundassem no tema estudado neste trabalho.

Desenho/Metodologia/Abordagem: A metodologia do estudo inclui uma revisão documental, tendo como estratégia principal a análise de conteúdo. Foram utilizadas as bases de dados Scopus, Redalyc, SciELO Dialnet e Google Scholar, com critérios de inclusão específicos relacionados ao período de publicação, tipo de estudo, idiomas e disponibilidade em formato aberto.

Resultados: Os dados encontrados revelaram que a evasão universitária ocorre devido a diversas situações, como fatores individuais e socioeconômicos, barreiras geográficas e de acesso, qualidade da educação e recursos disponíveis. Além disso, os aspectos culturais e sociais, e por vezes a falta de empatia por parte das autoridades, professores e colegas, provocam o abandono dos estudos universitários.

Implicações sociais, práticas e de investigação: O estudo tem implicações importantes para a compreensão e redução do abandono escolar no contexto universitário rural, o que terá repercussões em áreas como a educação, a política e o desenvolvimento social.

Originalidade/valor: É fundamental que os responsáveis pelas políticas educativas e pelas instituições universitárias trabalhem de forma coordenada para desenhar estratégias abrangentes e adaptadas às necessidades específicas de cada comunidade rural. A investigação e análise contínuas dos elementos que influenciam o abandono escolar identificarão novas oportunidades de melhoria e garantirão o acesso equitativo ao ensino superior. Isto contribuirá para o desenvolvimento académico, profissional e social dos estudantes rurais e fortalecerá o tecido educativo destas regiões. Em conjunto, estas sugestões visam reforçar a permanência dos estudantes e oferecer oportunidades educativas equitativas nas zonas rurais, contribuindo assim para uma maior igualdade de oportunidades e para o desenvolvimento integral destas comunidades.

Palavras-chave: Evasão, Universitários, Ensino Superior, Educação do Campo.

1 INTRODUCTION

Education, as a primary foundation for the progress and growth of societies, stands as a transformative vehicle capable of providing opportunities and opening doors to a prosperous future. As such, higher education plays a crucial role in equipping students with specialized skills and advanced knowledge that prepare them to face the challenges of the world of work.

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However, it is pertinent to note that not all students have equal access to these high-level academic institutions, as there are significant disparities between rural and urban areas (Ortega & Solano, 2002; Ortega & Solano, 2003). (Ortega & Solano, 2023).

In the context of education, rural areas often face specific challenges that hinder the availability of excellent education. Lack of resources, limited infrastructure and shortage of teaching staff are just some of the difficulties faced by rural learners. These limitations can affect the development of the skills required to access and remain in higher education, creating a significant gap in educational opportunities between urban and rural areas.

Higher education, in particular, plays a vital role in the social mobility and economic growth of individuals and communities. Universities and colleges offer varied academic programs, providing students with the opportunity to specialize in various areas and acquire the skills required to enter the job market. However, despite its importance, higher education remains inaccessible to many young people living in rural areas (Valero et al., 2022).

Education in rural areas is characterized by its particular context, where students often face additional challenges (Ortega & Solano, 2023).. Geographic distances, lack of adequate transportation, and limited cultural and social opportunities can negatively impact learners' motivation and dedication. Added to that, socioeconomic and cultural factors can also influence learners' decisions to abandon higher education in search of other alternatives, such as early insertion into the labor market or migration to urban areas (Charry, 2019).

It is in this complex scenario that the problem of student dropout from rural universities arises. Attrition refers to the premature abandonment of higher education studies by educadnos before completing their academic programs (Carvajal & Cervantes, 2017).. This phenomenon, widely studied and debated in the educational literature, represents a significant obstacle to development and equity of opportunities in rural areas.

Various studies and research have examined the reasons for and effects of student dropout in rural universities. Individual factors, such as lack of family support, lack of intrinsic motivation and insecurity in academic ability, intertwine with contextual factors, such as economic barriers and scarcity of job opportunities, to form a complex web of influences that lead learners to drop out of higher education in rural areas (Barrantes-Morales et al 2021).

Based on the arguments in the preceding paragraphs, this study will conduct an analysis of the existing literature on the dropout of students from rural universities. The most relevant studies that explain this phenomenon will be examined, with the objective of better understanding the underlying causes and proposing suggestions to promote equity of opportunities in rural areas and strengthen student retention.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, a review of previous research related to the study variables is addressed, where academic studies are examined as relevant sources for understanding the underlying causes of this phenomenon. Student dropout from rural universities is a major problem affecting rural communities around the world. College dropouts are less likely to find well-paid employment, and are more likely to live in poverty (Barrantes-Morales et al., 2021).

There are a variety of factors that contribute to the dropout of rural university students, including lack of access to educational resources, lack of family and community support, lack of motivation, among others. In this regard, it is relevant to highlight the research conducted by. Zambrano et al. (2018)which focused on investigating the causes of student dropout in rural university centers in Latin America. The results revealed that socioeconomic, educational and psychological factors exert a significant influence on this phenomenon. In addition, it was found that the implementation of retention and continuous follow-up measures during the university career contributes to a significant reduction in dropout at that level in other countries. These

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initiatives facilitate the identification of significant indicators, where economic challenges, family and personal background of students, as well as deficiencies in their previous education are recurrently observed. Although strategies for universities are proposed, the results suggest that there is still a lack of effective and questionable policies that holistically address the dropout situation in this context.

The objective of the study conducted by Guzmán et al. (2022)was to explore the reasons behind student dropout in rural higher education, using a systemic approach and analyzing the narrative experiences of Colombian students. The results revealed that the main recurring variables among the participants were work and family responsibilities, the economic situation of the learner and the role of the educators in the educational process. Based on these variables and the model used, they presented recommendations to be integrated into the framework of governmental and institutional measures to prevent and mitigate the dropout phenomenon. These projected actions seek to contribute to greater student retention and to promote equitable access to university-level education in rural environments, thus generating a positive effect on the educational and social progress of students in these regions.

In their study, Véliz & Zambrano (2018) highlight the importance of understanding the educational situation in rural areas, where the desire of young people to access university is closely linked to their economic condition and the context of marginalization. Factors such as the lack of teachers specialized in rural education and the absence of effective policies can affect the quality of education in these areas. Despite this, there is evidence of an improvement in the outlook for higher education, with 80% of rural inhabitants confident that their children will have a promising future after completing their university studies. This change in mentality reflects greater confidence in the education system and its ability to provide rural youth with the skills required for successful personal and professional development.

The examples given represent different approaches and contexts in which the causes of student dropout from rural universities have been investigated, providing valuable information for understanding and approaching this phenomenon from different perspectives.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this research, a documentary review was carried out. For the construction of knowledge, content analysis was used as the main strategy. (Lissabet, 2017). This technique was selected due to its ability to develop studies in an unbiased and quality manner, minimizing existing biases and providing reliable results for the scientific community.

In carrying out this study, we adopted the approach proposed by Rosales-Veitía & Marcano-Montilla (2022) as a methodological guide. These authors emphasize the importance of establishing a precise definition and a clear methodological route in this type of research, in order to ensure transparency and validation of the results by readers, reviewers and other researchers. It also recognizes the need to implement a set of strategies that allow for the adequate retrieval, selection and analysis of relevant documents. Following these guidelines, it was possible to develop a rigorous study that promotes the construction and reconstruction of knowledge on the subject of student dropout in rural universities.

In order to retrieve relevant information, the recognized databases Scopus, Redalyc, Scielo, Dialnet and Google Scholar were used as data sources. These platforms are recognized in the scientific community and provide access to peer-reviewed documents, thus guaranteeing their excellence. To carry out this process, an initial search was undertaken that yielded a total of 132 scientific articles. These articles were then systematized and selected by means of a sampling based on established criteria. The studies that met the characteristics presented in Table 1 were considered for inclusion in the analysis, resulting in a total of 57 papers selected for the development of this review.

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Table 1. Criteria for inclusion of documents

Criteria for including documents	
Temporal context	**Period 2017 - 2023**
Relevance	Studies with contributions to the understanding of the dropout of students from rural universities
	Empirical or review studies
Accessibility	Studies in Spanish, English or Portuguese language
	Open Access publication format

Note: Own elaboration (2023).

After identifying, organizing and systematizing the documents, an analysis was carried out using qualitative research techniques. For this purpose, artisanal methods were used to recognize the units of meaning through the identification of key words. To facilitate this process, online tools designed specifically for this purpose were used.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows the corpus of documents obtained and selected for the progress of this study, covering the different aspects of the research topic.

Table 2. List of papers reviewed in accordance with the study categories.

Category	Authors
Individual and socioeconomic factors	Castro-Montoya (2021); Nierotka (2023); Nishat (2020); Varela (2022); Cocoradă (2021); Rueda (2020); Aldowah (2020); Gonzales (2021); Chalela-Naffah (2020); Flanagan (2017); Barragan (2017); Pavelea (2020); Kuruppuarachchi (2017); Rodriguez-Pineda (2021); Patri (2023); Marôco (2020); Perera (2020); Navarro-Roldan (2021).
Geographical and access barriers	Felix (2023); Bruno (2022); Hincapie (2017); Riquelme (2017); Urbina-Nájera (2021); Mohammadi (2018); Herrera (2020); Alao (2022); Kalsoom (2022); Partridge (2021); Regmi (2020); Shapiro (2017); Furlong (2021); Van & Thi, 2021).
Quality of education and available resources	González (2019); Carrasco (2021); Pérez (2019); Navarro (2017); González (2018); Peña (2022); Otero (2021); Erazo (2022); Pérez (2023); Álvarez (2021); Carvajal (2017); Duche (2020); Domínguez-Lara (2021).
Cultural and social aspects	Zambrano (2018); Hernandez (2021); Reategui (2020); Erazo-Borras (2021); Castillo-Peña (2021); Barba (2020); Lozano (2020); Ruiz (2019); Gonzalez-Ramirez (2017); Mascheroni (2021); Chavez (2020); Fernandez (2023);

Note: Own elaboration (2023).

Next, an analysis is made of the aspects implicit in the existing literature on student dropout from rural universities, focusing on four main categories: a) individual and socioeconomic factors, b) geographic and access barriers, c) quality of education and available resources, and d) cultural and social aspects. These categories have been selected in order to comprehensively and comprehensively address the research topic, considering different dimensions and factors influencing student dropout in rural settings.

4.1 Individual and socioeconomic factors

Individual and socioeconomic factors play a fundamental role in the dropout of rural university students. These personal and contextual aspects can influence the determination to drop out and affect student retention in rural environments. Socioeconomic status, family support, motivation, educational and career aspirations are some of the factors that have been

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identified as key elements. Recognition of these factors is essential to better understand the underlying causes of college dropout in rural settings.

In this sense, in the first place, the socioeconomic level of the student has been identified as an influential factor in the dropout of students from rural universities. Castro-Montoya et al. (2021) have found that those students who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds face greater difficulties in financing their higher education, which in turn increases the probability of dropping out.

Lack of financial resources directly impacts a learner's ability to meet the expenses associated with education, such as tuition, the purchase of books and materials, transportation costs, and housing. These financial challenges can create an additional burden for rural students, especially when they do not have the financial support to cover these costs (Nierotka et al 2023).

In addition, economic constraints can make it difficult to access support services and academic resources that are critical to student success. For example, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds may have less access to tutoring programs, academic advising, or student wellness services that are vital to their academic and personal development (Nishat et al., 2020; Varela et al., 2022)..

Importantly, the impact of socioeconomic status is not only limited to financial aspects, but can also influence how learners perceive their own abilities (Cocoradă et al., 2021).. Lack of financial resources can generate a sense of inequality and limit students' academic and career expectations, which in turn can undermine their motivation and engagement in higher education, therefore, it is crucial to adopt measures and policies that address these inequities and provide equitable opportunities for rural students, thus promoting higher retention and academic success (Nishat et al., 2020)..

In addition, family support plays a crucial role in the educational journey of rural university students. The presence of a favorable family environment, characterized by emotional support, valuing education and encouragement towards higher studies has been associated with higher student retention (Rueda et al., 2020).

When students have strong family support, they feel emotionally supported in their pursuit of higher education, which can lead to a greater sense of self-confidence and motivation to persevere in their studies despite the challenges they may face (Rueda et al., 2020). Emotional support from the family can provide them with the necessary support to overcome academic and personal obstacles, strengthening their commitment to education and reducing the likelihood of dropout (Aldowah et al., 2020). Therefore, when the family values education and conveys this message to students, an environment conducive to academic development is created, because students recognize the significance assigned to education within their family environment and this positively influences their motivation and commitment to higher education. The recognition that the family gives to education can function as a protective factor against dropout, since students feel driven to achieve their academic goals and meet family expectations (Gonzales & Evaristo, 2002). (Gonzales & Evaristo, 2021).

On the other hand, the lack of family support can have negative consequences in the educational journey of rural university students. The absence of a family environment that emotionally supports their academic efforts can generate feelings of demotivation, disengagement and isolation. Without the necessary support, learners may experience difficulties in coping with academic and emotional challenges, increasing the likelihood of dropping out of university studies (Chalela-Naffah et al., 2020)..

Motivation is another crucial factor that influences rural learners' persistence in higher education (Flanagan, 2017). Research has consistently shown that the absence of internal motivation, i.e., the lack of a genuine interest in learning and obtaining a degree can contribute to student dropout (Barragán & González-Támara, 2017). When students lack intrinsic motivation, they may experience difficulties in fully committing to their studies. The lack of a

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sense of purpose and an emotional connection to the learning process can lead to decreased engagement and interest in academic activities, which, in turn, can increase the risk of discontinuing university studies (Pavelea & Moldova, 2020).

In addition, lack of clarity in academic and career goals, as well as lack of a sense of belonging to the educational institution can also undermine student motivation and increase the likelihood of dropout (Kuruppuarachchi & Karunanayake, 2017). When students do not have a clear vision of their educational and career goals, it can be difficult to maintain long-term motivation. Uncertainty about the path ahead and job prospects can generate doubts and demotivation, increasing the risk of attrition (Rodríguez-Pineda & Zamora-Araya, 2021)..

Likewise, identification with the academic community is another factor to consider in the motivation and retention of students (Patri et al., 2023). When students at rural universities do not feel part of the university community, they may experience a lack of emotional and social connection with their educational environment. The absence of a supportive environment and the lack of positive relationships with peers and faculty can undermine student motivation and sense of belonging (Marôco et al., 2020)..

Academic and career expectations are also a relevant factor in the dropout of higher level learners in rural settings (Perera & Abeysekera, 2020). Some students may experience doubts about their ability to succeed academically or to find suitable job opportunities once they complete their university studies. These uncertainties may undermine their commitment and lead to early dropout decisions (Navarro-Roldan & Zamudio, 2021). On the other hand, when students have clear and realistic expectations about the educational and professional opportunities that await them, they tend to be more motivated and committed to their studies.

To summarize, this category has revealed that aspects such as socioeconomic status, family support, motivation, and academic and professional expectations have a significant influence on the dropout of students from rural universities. Learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds face financial difficulties in meeting educational expenses, which increases the likelihood of dropping out. Emotional support and family recognition of education promote student retention, while lack of family support can lead to demotivation and disengagement. Lack of internal motivation and lack of clarity in academic and professional goals also increase the risk of dropout. These findings underscore the importance of addressing these factors in the design of educational strategies and policies that foster the retention and educational success of rural learners, promoting educational equity

4.2 Geographical and access barriers

Geographic and access barriers also represent significant challenges for rural university students. These barriers can hinder their ability to access and continue in university education (Félix et al., 2023). Some of the key issues that have been recognized in this category include distance to educational institutions, lack of adequate transportation, insufficient infrastructure, and technological limitations.

With regard to distance to universities, it is undeniable that it represents a major barrier faced by students. The remote location of these institutions can make access difficult for students living in remote areas. The lack of nearby universities may require rural students to travel long distances to attend classes, which implies higher transportation costs and more time invested in commuting (Bruno et al., 2022).

This situation can have several negative effects on the educational journey of learners. First, increased transportation costs can place a significant financial burden on students and their families. Transportation expenses, whether in the form of fuel, public transportation fares, or vehicle maintenance, can represent an additional financial hurdle for those students already

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facing socioeconomic hardship (Hincapie et al., 2017).. These additional costs can further hinder access to college education and increase the likelihood of attrition.

Similarly, the time spent commuting can also negatively impact rural college students (Riquelme, 2017). The extensive distances they must travel to reach the university can involve hours of daily commuting, which reduces the time available to study, participate in extracurricular activities and rest adequately, generating physical and mental exhaustion, and, therefore, affecting academic performance and student motivation.

Another important aspect that impacts the dropout of rural university students is the lack of flexibility in public or private transportation schedules, which can make it difficult to reconcile class schedules with available transportation schedules. Some learners may find themselves in situations where there is not an adequate match between transportation schedules and their class schedules, which can result in delays, absences, and difficulties in meeting academic commitments (Urbina-Nájera et al., 2021).. This lack of synchronization can generate additional stress and affect student retention.

In addition, the lack of synchronization between transportation schedules and class schedules can create difficulties in meeting academic commitments. Rural students may find themselves in situations where they must choose between attending classes or using available transportation to return home. This trade-off can be especially challenging for those students who rely on public transportation, as schedules may be limited and may not allow them to attend all of their classes on a regular basis (Mohammadi et al., 2018). These difficulties related to the lack of flexibility in transportation schedules can have a significant impact on student retention. Students who are consistently late or miss classes due to transportation issues may feel demotivated and experience a sense of disengagement with their education

Along the same lines, the lack of adequate transportation also affects rural students. The lack of reliable and affordable private public transportation options can hinder the daily commute to and from universities, generating difficulties in meeting class schedules and increasing the economic burden for students who pay for their own transportation (Herrera & Rivera, 2020). The additional cost of transportation can further limit their available resources to cover other educational and daily expenses, increasing the likelihood of dropout.

On the other hand, insufficient educational infrastructure is another significant obstacle contributing to student dropout from rural universities (Alao & Brink, 2022). The lack of adequate facilities, such as libraries, laboratories, and study spaces, can limit access to enriching learning resources and opportunities, affecting the quality of education and hindering the active involvement of learners in their academic training process (Kalsoom et al., 2022).

The lack of well-equipped libraries limits access to study materials and up-to-date information sources, which can hinder the development of research skills and the acquisition of relevant knowledge (Partridge et al., 2021). Rural students may face difficulties in accessing books, scientific journals, or other academic sources relevant to their training. This lack of access to up-to-date bibliographic resources can limit their ability to delve deeper into topics of study and to keep up with advances in their academic field.

The lack of adequate laboratories and study spaces also represents a negative impact. The lack of laboratories equipped with state-of-the-art technology can hinder the development of practical and experimental skills necessary for certain disciplines, limiting their exposure to relevant practical experiences and affecting their preparation for the labor field (Regmi & Jones, 2020). Similarly, the lack of adequate study spaces also hinders the active involvement of learners in their academic training process, affecting concentration, group work and interaction with peers and professors, and, consequently, decreases students' motivation and responsibility with their university studies.

These limitations in educational infrastructure can lead to the dropout of rural university students. The lack of resources and enriching learning opportunities can lead to dissatisfaction,

demotivation, and a sense of disadvantage compared to students who have access to better facilities, increasing the likelihood that learners will drop out, with a view to seeking educational options that provide them with a more complete and enriching experience (Shapiro et al., 2017).

In addition to all these factors, technological limitations are also a major challenge for students in rural universities (Furlong et al., 2021), because the limited availability of high-speed connections and the lack of appropriate equipment can limit the availability of digital tools, online learning platforms and virtual communication opportunities, generating a digital divide between rural and urban students, making it difficult to access updated information and technological tools necessary for their academic development (Van & Thi, 2021).

In short, geographic and access barriers represent major obstacles for rural university students. Distance to educational institutions, lack of adequate transportation, insufficient educational infrastructure and technological limitations make it difficult for rural learners to access and actively engage in university education, increasing the likelihood of dropout and limiting their learning opportunities.

4.3 Quality of education and available resources

Another element that influences the dropout of rural university students is the quality of education and available resources. This category has made it possible to identify some key elements such as the evaluation of education in terms of available educational resources, teacher training, learning opportunities, and restrictions in the availability of academic programs.

In the context of rural universities, the accessibility and excellence of educational materials are essential elements that influence student retention and the quality of education (González et al., 2019). Educational resources cover a wide range of elements, from traditional teaching materials to advanced technology and access to online resources (Carrasco, 2021). Lack of access to up-to-date, quality educational resources can have a significant effect on learning opportunities for disciples. In many instances, rural universities may face difficulties in keeping their libraries up to date, which limits access to books, academic journals, and other relevant study materials. Also, the lack of well-equipped laboratories and modern technology can affect students' experience in fields that require experimental practices and technical skills (Perez et al., 2019).

As discussed, the limited availability of educational resources in rural universities can generate inequalities between students in these areas and those who have access to a greater variety of resources in urban educational institutions (Navarro et al., 2017). This disparity can negatively affect the quality of education and create barriers to academic progress for rural students. Limitations in the availability of quality educational materials can affect knowledge acquisition, research, skill development, and the ability of learners to meet academic challenges (González & Arismendi, 2018).

On the other hand, the level of teacher training plays a crucial role in the quality of education and, therefore, in the prevention of student dropout. Well-trained teachers are capable of providing excellent instruction, adjusted to the individual demands of rural students and based on updated pedagogical approaches (Peña & Patiño, 2022).. However, in many cases, rural university teachers face challenges in terms of professional development and training opportunities. Lack of resources and specific programs can limit their access to ongoing training, resulting in a gap in their pedagogical skills and knowledge, affecting the quality of education provided to rural learners. Teachers who are not adequately trained may have difficulty adapting their instructional methods according to the particularities and profiles of rural learners. This can lead to a lack of active participation, lack of interest and, ultimately, to student dropout (Otero, 2021).

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In addition, lack of training in key areas, such as the use of educational technologies and the implementation of inclusive approaches, can limit learning and development opportunities for rural students. The lack of resources and updated pedagogical knowledge can generate a mismatch between the educational needs of students and what is offered to them, which can demotivate them and drive them away from their studies (Erazo & Rosero, 2022).

It is true that limited academic offerings in rural universities can have a significant impact on student retention and dropout. The lack of specialized programs and diversified study options can limit the learning opportunities and integral development of learners, which in turn can affect their motivation and commitment to their studies (Pérez et al., 2023).. On many occasions, rural students may face the difficult decision of choosing between academic programs that do not fully match their interests and career goals, or moving to urban institutions to access a greater variety of academic options (Alvarez, 2021). This situation can generate a sense of dissatisfaction and demotivation among rural students, who may perceive a lack of opportunities to develop their skills and talents in their own community.

At the same time, the limitation in academic offerings may also affect the holistic formation of learners, since participation in extracurricular activities and specialized programs is fundamental for their personal and professional growth (Carvajal & Cervantes, 2017).. The lack of extracurricular options can reduce the possibilities for developing social skills, leadership and teamwork, essential aspects for success in student life and beyond (Duche et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential that rural universities work on expanding their academic offerings and creating specialized programs that fit the needs and interests of learners, in order to ensure student retention (Duche et al., 2020).

It is relevant to highlight that educational excellence and available resources refer not only to tangible aspects, but also to the quality of the educational environment and the institutional climate. A supportive, inclusive and participatory environment can influence student retention and academic success (Domínguez-Lara et al., 2021). On the other hand, the lack of an environment conducive to learning can generate demotivation and disengagement on the part of students, thus increasing the probability of dropping out (Rueda et al., 2020).

4.4 Cultural and social aspects

Cultural and social aspects play a crucial role in the determination of rural university students to continue or drop out of higher education. These elements are deeply rooted in the rural context and can have a significant impact on students' perceptions and decisions regarding their education (Zambrano et al., 2018).

In rural settings, community norms and social expectations exert a significant influence on learners' perceptions of the relevance of higher education (Hernández & Padilla, 2021). In many of these communities, the traditional valuing of agricultural work and traditional trades has been a fundamental part of their cultural and economic identity for generations. As a result, university education can be perceived as a less relevant option or even as a deviation from established roles and traditions (Reategui et al., 2020).

Young students may feel strong pressure to adhere to prevailing social expectations and follow the professional and occupational paths established by their predecessors (Erazo-Borras et al., 2021).. This pressure can have a significant impact on their educational decisions and their motivation to continue their university studies. Experiencing the expectation of fulfilling the traditional model of rural life, some students may question the relevance and value of university education in the context of their community (Reategui et al., 2020).

Also, in these communities, the lack of representation of role models who have pursued higher education may limit the perception of the possibilities offered by higher education. The absence of individuals in leadership roles or professionals with university backgrounds may

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influence the perception that young people have of the possibilities and advantages of higher education in their lives (Castillo-Peña, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to create orientation and awareness programs aimed at rural students and their families, focused on highlighting the benefits and opportunities offered by college education. These programs can provide information on professional careers that align with the traditions and needs of rural communities, demonstrating that higher education can coexist and enrich the local social and economic fabric (Barba, 2020).

Similarly, family pressures can be a determinant factor in student dropout in rural universities (Lozano & Maldonado, 2020).. In some rural communities, families are economically dependent on students' work, which can generate pressure for them to leave college and engage in work activities that contribute to the family income. For some rural students, higher education may be perceived as a luxury or a long-term investment, which may conflict with the immediate economic needs of their families. Lack of support and understanding from loved ones may discourage students, making them feel guilty or responsible for contributing financially to the household, even if this means abandoning their studies.

This situation is exacerbated in cases where local employment opportunities are limited and migration to urban areas is not a viable option for everyone (Ruiz, 2019). In such circumstances, rural students may face a dilemma between duty to their family and the desire to pursue higher education that offers them greater long-term opportunities.

On the other hand, cultural expectations around gender may have an impact on women's determination to drop out of higher education (González-Ramírez & Pedraza-Navarro, 2017).. In some rural communities, ingrained stereotypes persist that assign traditional roles to women, relegating them primarily to caring for the home and family (Mascheroni, 2021). Expectations that women devote themselves to home and family care can limit their opportunities to continue their education, which can lead to higher student dropout among this group, in addition, social pressure to conform to these expectations can generate internal conflict and difficulties in making decisions that challenge established norms.

Along the same lines, gender constraints can also manifest themselves in the unequal distribution of resources and educational opportunities for women and men in rural settings (Chávez et al., 2020).. Women may face additional obstacles in accessing specific study programs, leadership opportunities or spaces for participation in extracurricular activities that can enrich their educational experience, making it necessary to promote gender equality and equal opportunities in access to and participation in higher education (Fernández et al., 2023).

Ultimately, addressing cultural expectations around gender and promoting equity of opportunity in higher education will help reduce student dropout among women in rural settings and foster a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

In summary, cultural and social aspects play a significant role in rural college students' determination to leave higher education. Community norms, social expectations, family pressures, and gender stereotypes can influence learners' perceptions and decisions about their education. It is essential to address these issues and promote an educational culture that values and supports university education as a means for individual development and the advancement of rural communities.

5 CONCLUSIONS

After examining the literature on student dropout in rural universities, it has become evident that there are various factors that influence this complex phenomenon. In the first place, the importance of the socioeconomic level of the students stands out, since those from disadvantaged families face greater difficulties in paying for their studies, which increases the risk of dropping out of university.

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Family support also plays a key role, as students who have the emotional support and appreciation of education from their families are more likely to persevere in their studies. In terms of geographic and access barriers, it was identified that distances to universities and lack of adequate transportation can discourage students from rural areas and make it difficult for them to attend classes regularly. Likewise, insufficient educational infrastructure can limit access to resources and enriching learning opportunities.

Finally, cultural and social aspects, such as social expectations and family pressures, can influence the determination to continue or abandon higher education. Gender stereotypes also affect women's participation in higher education.

To address this problem, it is essential to suggest lines of action that promote equal opportunities and strengthen student retention in rural universities, as well as to establish educational policies that address socioeconomic inequalities and promote access to resources and support services.

SUGGESTIONS

In order to promote greater equity of opportunity and strengthen student retention in rural universities, several strategies and educational policies are proposed. First, it is essential to establish scholarship and financial support programs aimed at students with limited economic resources, with the objective of alleviating the economic burden and facilitating their access to and permanence in higher education.

Likewise, priority should be given to the development of educational infrastructure in rural areas, guaranteeing the availability of libraries, laboratories and updated technology to enrich the learning process and provide students with an adequate and favorable educational environment to ensure student retention. On the other hand, another relevant measure is the training and support to teachers of rural universities, through training and updating programs, to optimize the quality of instruction and ensure adequate support to students.

In addition, it is important to promote relevant academic programs linked to local needs, in order to offer educational options aligned with job opportunities and regional development. In terms of technology, it is proposed to facilitate access to digital resources and online tools in rural areas, in order to overcome technological limitations that may affect the educational process.

To promote a shared understanding of the relevance of higher education, it is necessary to carry out awareness campaigns aimed at the community and families, highlighting the personal and community benefits of access to quality education.

These are just some of the suggestions among many others that could be implemented to address the dropout of students in rural universities and promote equal opportunities in these areas. It is crucial that education policy makers and university institutions work together to design comprehensive strategies tailored to the specific needs of each rural community. Ongoing research and analysis of the elements that influence student dropout will identify new opportunities for improvement and ensure equitable access to higher education, thus contributing to the academic, professional and social development of rural students and strengthening the educational fabric of these regions. Together, these suggestions seek to strengthen student retention and provide equitable educational opportunities in rural areas, thus contributing to greater equality of opportunities and the integral development of these communities.

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