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ABSTRACT

Within the domain of public affairs and political science (PAPS), student dropout emerges as a critical concern. This study delves into the factors influencing the decisions of undergraduate and graduate PAPS students to discontinue their programs. Employing a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, we surveyed 384 at-risk undergraduates and conducted in-depth interviews with 18 former graduate students. Thematic analysis of these interviews revealed six pivotal factors influencing graduate student dropout: the financial burden of study (including tuition and limited financial aid), program curricular challenges (such as demanding thesis requirements and inadequate practical components), the delicate balance of multiple responsibilities (work, study, and family), health-related issues (including anxiety and stress), poor academic performance, and personal difficulties (such as lack of family support). At the undergraduate level, descriptive analyses indicated that 38% of PAPS students contemplated dropping out, with 30% considering changing their major. Exploratory Factor Analysis and Multiple Regression highlighted the significance of factors such as family and societal influences, economic considerations, program and curriculum structure, institutional dynamics, academic performance, personal attitudes, and student health in shaping these contemplations. This research not only expands the application of integration and engagement theory and the pull, push, and failing out theory but also validates their effectiveness in predicting dropout within PAPS programs. The study offers valuable insights for both researchers and policymakers, underscoring the imperative for more supportive, flexible, and financially viable educational structures to enhance student retention in the realm of public affairs and political science.

Introduction

Public Affairs and Political Science (PAPS) constitute a multifaceted field, encompassing disciplines such as public administration, public policy, public management, and political science. PAPS programs are designed to prepare students for diverse careers, particularly in the public sector, enabling them to address complex societal issues (Rich

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2013; Yaghi and Yaghi, 2023). Since the establishment of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), universities have offered PAPS programs, playing a pivotal role in graduating numerous public officials and senior decision-makers in the public sector (Hassock and Hill 2022a; Al-Hummadi 2013; Zahran, Pettaway, and Waller 2016). However, despite the proliferation of higher education institutions offering PAPS degrees, a concerning dropout rate persists, particularly among male students (Gallagher 2019; Ashour 2020a, 2020b; Hassock and Hill 2022b).

The dropout issue in PAPS programs warrants empirical investigation. The underlying assumption is that an increase in PAPS program enrollment is positive, aligning with the programs' goal of producing individuals trained to serve society and contribute value to various sectors. The author contends that stakeholders, including academic managers, government recruiting agencies, and parents, should grasp the specific nature of the dropout problem in PAPS (Yaghi, 2024; Marzec 2018; Rich 2013; Schultz 2016).

In the past decade, research attention has predominantly focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) students rather than PAPS students. Furthermore, studies on the general topic of dropout in the Arab world, particularly in the UAE, are limited and often fail to distinguish between university or school dropout (Tabrizi 2013; Salim, 2019; Ridge, Farah, and Shami 2013; Wilkins 2010). Moreover, no research has specifically addressed dropout among PAPS students. This paper aims to address this gap in the literature and provide insights to program directors and institutions on dropout prevention policies.

The significance of focusing on PAPS programs lies in their direct link to government work and the public sector. Many PAPS graduates enter public service, making dropout a concern as it depletes potential civil servants and sources of new talent (Bin Braik 2023; Yaghi and Yaghi 2023). PAPS programs cover essential topics affecting society's wellbeing, government decisions, and policies (Haupt, Kapucu, and Hu 2017; Rich 2013; Yaghi and Alibeli 2014). Therefore, investigating dropout among PAPS students and identifying influencing factors is vital. Understanding these factors can enhance the quality and relevance of PAPS education, improve student retention and success, and provide interdisciplinary insights from other disciplines and contexts (Guzmán, Salazar, and Parra 2021; Yaghi and Almutawwa 2023). This study contributes to advancing knowledge and innovation in PAPS education and research. The subsequent sections of this paper will delve into background and context, theory, relevant literature, methods, findings and discussion, analyzing the responses of graduate dropouts, conclusion, and limitations.

Background and context

This section provides essential background information and context for the problem of dropout in PAPS programs in the UAE. It discusses the prevalence, impact, and causes of dropout in general, as well as the significance and challenges of PAPS education in the UAE. Additionally, it identifies a gap in the literature on dropout among PAPS students, a gap that this paper aims to fill.

The impact of dropout on the UAE, and similar countries, can be severe. The UAE has long grappled with a demographic imbalance where local citizens constitute only a minority within their own country, making up just around one-tenth of the total

population (Yaghi 2016; Yaghi and Yaghi 2023). This preexisting issue intensifies the country's urgent need for locally educated graduates. Notably, the government is particularly concerned about the low numbers of male graduates, accounting for less than 35% of the total graduates from higher education. In contrast, dropout rates among female students across all majors are significantly lower (Al Kaabi 2016; Abdulla and Ridge 2010). The government is committed to reducing the dropout rate, particularly among male students, as a heightened attrition rate may necessitate the public sector's increased recruitment of female nationals or expatriates of both genders. Such outcomes could exacerbate demographic imbalances, which is contrary to the desired objectives of the UAE's human resource policies. These policies aim to cultivate a workforce that is proportionally equitable in gender representation and diverse in nationality. In 2011, the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research highlighted that dropout rates for boys and girls in high school in the UAE stood at 20–25% and 14%, respectively (Edarabia.com, 2011). Chaudhary (2013) cited Zureik (2005) in reporting that the dropout rate in the UAE was 35% among boys in grades 10 to 12, compared to 25% among girls in the same years. Nasir (2017) quoted the Minister of Education, pointing out that the dropout rate for university students was 14%, although this figure was uncertain due to limited scientific research on tertiary education dropout (Ashour, 2020a, 2020b; Alkaabi and Noor 2020). Unfortunately, most local studies and reports did not differentiate between dropout rates in high schools and universities, potentially obscuring the true extent of the issue (Chaudhary 2013; Bridi and Al Hosani 2022). Regardless of the specific dropout rate, the federal government implemented several policies and initiatives aiming to ensure an adequate supply of educated local workforce and a reasonable reduction in dropout, especially among males, who comprise less than 30% of all university students (Hamdan, 2013; Yaghi, 2024). However, despite these efforts, government intervention has not yet effectively eliminated or significantly reduced the dropout numbers. The Ministry of Education asserts that the 14% dropout rate, compared to other countries, may not be excessively high but still signifies a grave problem (Nasir 2017).

Using the basic definition of dropout as the non-completion of education (Krstić, Stepanović-Ilić, and Videnović 2017), previous research findings suggest that dropout, in general, is linked to various factors, including students' lack of interest in academic life, poor academic performance, low grades, excessive absences and tardiness, on-campus misconduct, repeated changes of schools, and changes in college majors (Ashour 2020a, 2020b; Parahoo, Harvey, and Tamim 2013; Hassock and Hill 2022a). The persistent occurrence of this phenomenon, especially among males, necessitates a closer examination of these factors within the UAE context. The UAE's case is significant for many reasons; it is one of the few countries grappling with a deeply entrenched demographic imbalance. Even before independence and the unification of the seven emirates, expatriates constituted a considerable portion of the UAE population (Ashour 2020a, 2020b; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman 2012). As the UAE embraces a free market, the government faces the challenge of balancing its flourishing economy, heavily reliant on foreign human labor, with its obligation to cultivate a national capacity based on locally trained and well-qualified individuals, particularly university graduates. Government intervention appears to be a top national priority,

as evidenced by the 70-year plan, a long-term national development strategy, which lists the training and qualification of local human capital as a top priority (Ashour 2020a, 2020b; Yaghi and Bates 2023).

Theory

This section delves into prominent theories and pertinent literature on student dropout, particularly in PAPS programs. It explores two categories of theories offering plausible explanations for dropout: (a) the integration and engagement theory by Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975, 2012) and (b) the pull-push and failing-out theory by Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1994) and Watt and Roessingh (1994). It also summarizes some of the most common factors that influence dropout, such as socioeconomic, personal, scholastic, and policy factors.

First, the integration and engagement theory includes the work of Vincent Tinto (2012) who explained that students leave college for three main reasons: they struggle academically, they are uncertain about their educational and career goals, and they do not feel connected to the academic and social community of the institution. Tinto's "Model of Institutional Departure" explains these factors by arguing that, to stay in college, students need to be involved in both formal (academic achievement) and informal (interaction with faculty and staff) academic systems and both formal (participation in extracurricular activities) and informal (relationship with peers) social systems (Tinto 1975, 2012; Aljohani 2016). Based on Durkheim's Suicide Theory (Durkheim 1951), Spady (1970, 1971) argued that the interaction between students and their surrounding is the outcome of exposing individual students' attributes such as preferences, interests, attitudes and skills to the influences, expectations and demands of the different components of their institutions including courses, faculty members, administrators and peers. He further posited that the outcome of this interaction determines the level of students' integration within the academic and social systems of their institutions and consequently their persistence (Spady 1971). Therefore, a student's decision to stay or withdraw from his or her academic institution is influenced by two main factors in each of two systems: grades and intellectual development in the academic system, and normative correspondence and friendship support in the social system (Aljohani 2016; Nicoletti 2019).

Second, the pull-push and failing-out theory includes the work of Doll, Eslami, and Walters (2013) who explain that three groups of factors influence the behavior of dropping out of school, namely push factors, pull factors, and falling out factors. Push factors refer to school-related factors that make a student's life at school a negative experience, such as having bad relationships with teachers, improper school building and equipment, testing policy, and attendance policy. According to Jordan, Lara, and McPartland (1994), the pull factors refer to outside-school factors attracting or forcing students to drop out, such as family-related factors, job recruiters from agencies, economic needs, social struggle, and disability. Failingout of school refers to factors that relate to the students themselves, such as lack of interest in learning, bad attitude, aggressive behavior against others, and poor academic achievement (Watt and Roessingh 1994; Doll, Eslami, and Walters 2013). It can be

said that push, pull, and failing out factors are interrelated yet have different effects on dropout. As Doll, Eslami, and Walters (2013, p.2) clarify, the agency factor distinguishes between each group of factors; the agent in push out factors is school while it is society in pull out factors and the individual students in the failing out factors. The agency, therefore, plays an important role in public policy because the intervention to reduce dropout should target the right component where the push out, the pull out, and the failing out factors occur.

Regardless however of the agent where the causes of dropout may happen, the core of dropout remains student's disengagement with the school. Because push, pull and failing out factors may overlap, they cause confusion to policymakers about where the intervention should start (Finn 1993; Yaghi, Morris, and Gibson 2007). Lehr et al. (2004) explain that disengagement is the fundamental behavior in dropout because students make decision to leave school because they failed to belong to the school. Whatever happens after or before disengagement itself is something that may go beyond the direct control of policymakers. Disengagement is associated with certain problems which the government can influence with the proper policies. These problems according to Lehr et al. (2004) and Finn (1993) include student's constant withdrawals, unusual school experiences in the past or present, poor sense of belonging, and disliking school. These factors and others make student's disengagement a reality that is difficult to reverse (Finn 1993). Students' engagement in school, thus, is an integral part of students' completion of school; when students engage in school on psychological, social, and academic levels, they are likely to finish their study and graduate.

In the following section, a summary of the most relevant literature on dropout will show how socioeconomic, personal, scholastic, and policy factors influence dropout which all can be explained by a theoretical combination of push, pull, and failing out and disengagement theories. From this discussion, it is proposed that student dropout will be influenced by many factors, including demographics, family, society, institutional, and academic performance factors (proposition 1).

Relevant literature

This section reviews relevant literature on student dropout, with a focus on dropout in PAPS programs whenever possible. It explores the multifaceted factors associated with dropout, including social maladjustment, behavioral disorders, delinquency, socioeconomic variables, academic advising, registration difficulties, work responsibilities, health status, anxiety, uncertainty, isolation, alienation, academic challenges, teaching methodologies, teacher attitudes, attendance, motivation, interest, goal setting, expectations, engagement, social support, and economic challenges. Additionally, it compares and contrasts findings from different countries and contexts, identifying commonalities among them.

Notably, there was a scarcity of prior research specifically addressing the dropout or intention to dropout of PAPS students in the UAE; most studies were generalized to student dropout in higher education. Even in other countries, prior research predominantly focused on STEM fields rather than PAPS (Pasha-Zaidi and Afari 2016). However, a review of existing studies reveals three key facts: (a) dropout is influenced by a multitude of factors; (b) the UAE shares several factors influencing dropout with other

countries; and (c) empirical studies substantiate the assertions of the major theories discussed earlier. The ensuing discussion highlights select studies closely aligned with the scope of this research.

Fortin et al. (2006) and Nurmalitasari, Long, and Noor (2023) delineated that dropout was associated with students' social maladjustment, behavioral disorders, and delinquency. They categorized dropout students into four groups based on the reasons for their dropout, including disinterest in education, difficulties in adjusting to school and social life, covert disengagement due to family or social reasons, and students experiencing depression, anxiety, or other health issues hindering their studies (Fortin et al. 2006; Yaghi 2022).

Several studies emphasized the link between dropout and students' socio-economic variables. Hailat et al. (2022) contended that economically disadvantaged students and those from low-income families were at a higher risk of university dropout. Salim (2019) identified diverse factors contributing to dropout, encompassing student attitudes toward school, academic performance, absenteeism, institutional shortcomings, family-related issues, and financial constraints. Additionally, Chaudhary (2013) emphasized the impact of family size, parental involvement, and negative school experiences on students' decisions to drop out.

In neighboring Oman, Sangeetha (2021) found that low-income, poor academic performance, and personal factors such as lack of interest and health problems influenced STEM student dropout. In Saudi Arabia, absenteeism, lack of educational goals, the need for employment, and a perceived diminished value of academic degrees were identified as predictors of dropout (Al Abdulrazaq, Abdulmutalib, and Abdullah 2022). Morocco experienced dropout rates between 28% and 30% among first and second-year university students, with factors like health status, anxiety, academic challenges, inadequate teaching methodologies, and alienation contributing significantly (Razouki et al. 2019).

The literature highlights striking similarities in dropout factors across diverse countries, suggesting that dropout is increasingly a global concern (Fortin et al. 2006; Smith and Yang 2017). Factors such as academic advising, registration issues, engagement, social support, learning difficulties, lack of motivation, and economic challenges were found to be common predictors in various international contexts (Smith and Yang 2017). These findings indicate that while the factors influencing student dropout are similar across countries, their impact might differ based on cultural and institutional contexts (proposition 2).

Despite the breadth of research, the literature reveals an intricate web of factors influencing dropout. However, a clear delineation of universal versus context-specific factors is lacking. Consequently, this study argues that dropout among PAPS students results from a complex interplay of personal, social, institutional, and economic factors that influence a student's decision to leave university without completing their degree (proposition 3). Given this ambiguity and the absence of a comprehensive dropout theory, this study proposes employing exploratory factor analysis to identify crucial predictors of dropout specific to PAPS in the UAE. This approach aims to provide nuanced insights for policymakers, educators, and academic administrators grappling with the challenge of student dropout in PAPS programs.

Methods

This study focused on the dropout phenomenon among undergraduate PAPS students in the UAE. The population of the study consisted of students enrolled in undergraduate PAPS programs across 5 universities in 2023 (see, Table 1). These universities collectively enrolled over 55,000 students at various levels, including bachelor, master, and doctorate programs. While the exact figures for undergraduate PAPS enrollment in 2023–2024 were not officially available, it was estimated to range between 30 and 1000 students. Despite the popularity of PAPS programs, the issue of dropout raised significant concerns among stakeholders, including decision-makers, parents, and educators. Limited research on this subject exacerbated these concerns, adding ambiguity to the underlying factors behind student dropout.

To investigate this phenomenon, the study interviewed 18 participants who fell into various categories denoting dropout among master's students: (a) those who dropped out between 2013 and 2023; (b) students who studied at least one master-level course but did not complete it and left the program; (c) students who completed one course but did not continue; (d) students who studied several courses but did not fulfill all the requirements; and (e) students who completed coursework but did not defend their master's thesis, thus not graduating. These dropouts participated in semi-structured interviews where they provided in-depth insights about their experiences (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006).

In this study, we embraced a mixed-methods approach, acknowledging the complementary strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research. The rationale behind employing both methods is rooted in our dedication to an exhaustive exploration of the student dropout phenomenon. Quantitative data, amassed through surveys from undergraduate students, lays a broad statistical groundwork to discern patterns and trends in dropout intentions. Conversely, qualitative data, procured from interviews with graduate

Table 1. Sample PAPS programs in the UAE in 2023–2024.

Name of the university*	Public affairs program offered
1. UAE University (290 QS, 288 Times) (UAEU. 2023)	Bachelor of Arts in Political Science; Master of Governance and Public Policy
2. University of Sharjah (601–650 QS, 383 Times) (University of Sharjah 2023)	Bachelor of Arts in International Relations
3. American University of Sharjah (411–429 QS) (American University of Sharjah 2023)	Bachelor of Arts in International Studies; Master of Arts in International Affairs and Diplomacy
4. Zayed University (2022)	Bachelor of Science in International Studies; Master of Arts in Diplomacy and International Affairs
5. Khalifa University (230 QS, 183 Times) (Khalifa University 2023)	Bachelor of Arts in International and Comparative Politics
6. New York University Abu Dhabi (2023)	Bachelor of Arts in Political Science; Master of Arts in Political Science
7. American University in Dubai (2023)	Bachelor of Arts in International Studies; Master of Arts in International Relations and Diplomacy
8. University of Wollongong in Dubai (2023)	Bachelor of Commerce in International Business; Master of International Studies
9. American University in the Emirates (2023)	Bachelor of Arts in Diplomacy and International Relations; Master of Arts in Diplomatic Studies
10. Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (2023)	Master of Public Administration
11. British University in Dubai (2023)	Master of Science in Public Policy

*The QS World University Rankings 2024 and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2024 are both based on data collected in 2023.

participants, yields intricate insights into the lived experiences and retrospective contemplations on the dropout process.

The deliberate engagement of two distinct populations for data collection was strategic. Undergraduates, positioned at the vanguard of the educational experience, provide immediate and contemporary perspectives on elements that may sway their decision to persist or cease their studies. Graduates, conversely, offer a longitudinal perspective, reflecting on their entire educational odyssey and the repercussions of their choices.

This methodological choice facilitates a diachronic analysis, encapsulating both the anticipatory and the realized facets of the dropout experience. We do not seek direct comparability between the two datasets; rather, we value the profound, stratified comprehension that arises from their interplay. The quantitative scrutiny of undergraduates' intentions acts as a prognostic gauge, while the qualitative revelations from graduates furnish a confirmatory perspective on the actual dropout occurrences.

We recognize that this approach might prompt inquiries regarding the amalgamation of findings from the two cohorts. Nonetheless, we contend that the potency of our study is anchored in its capacity to weave a multi-faceted narrative of the dropout phenomenon. The quantitative and qualitative findings are not conjoined haphazardly; they are construed as interconnected, yet discrete, contributions to an all-encompassing understanding of the dynamics influencing dropout rates within PAPS programs.

A specialized survey, developed based on the literature review, was administered to a random convenience sample of 384 undergraduate PAPS students between September 2022 and July 2023. The research team employed a drop-off, pick-up method for collecting completed surveys. Both the survey and interview methods were deemed appropriate for achieving the study's objectives (Jackson-Smith et al. 2016; Allred and Ross-Davis 2011). Identifying undergraduate students who dropped out posed a significant challenge as universities either lacked updated addresses for these students or did not release relevant information. Consequently, the survey included questions about students' "intention" to dropout, encompassing those with low GPAs, multiple dropped courses, major changes, suspensions, or behavioral issues. Previous research supported assessing the "intention" to dropout as a valid measure of students' dropout behavior (Astin 1975; Pascarella and Terenzini 1980; Fourie 2020; Morelli et al. 2023; Mostert, van Rensburg, and Machaba 2023).

To ensure the validity of the survey study design, the researchers followed a rigorous procedure. Initially, the survey was administered to a convenience sample of 1275 PAPS students. Subsequently, surveys in which respondents answered "No" to any of the following three introductory questions were excluded: "Have you ever thought about changing your current major?" "Have you ever thought about dropping out of university?" "Have you ever made a plan to drop out of school?" The remaining 384 surveys underwent analysis using PSS.V29. The survey was meticulously evaluated by five experts, including three professors and two language specialists. These experts provided valuable feedback regarding the number and wording of survey questions. The revised version of the survey underwent a second evaluation and approval by the experts before being piloted with 78 students. The final survey exhibited acceptable reliability, indicated by a Cronbach's Alpha measure of $\alpha = 0.889$ (McNeish 2018).

Findings and discussion

Table 2 illustrates that 79% of undergraduate students fall within the ages of 19 to 26 years, with nearly half of them (47%) falling between 19 and 22 years old. Similar to most other majors, the majority of PAPS students (62%) are female. Given the relatively late age of marriage in the UAE for both genders, 92% of the students are single, and 78% come from middle-class income families. Moreover, 93% of the students come from two-parent households, and 88% have at least one parent employed in a paid position. This data reflects the societal shift in the UAE toward increased education and modernization, leading to smaller family sizes (refer to Tables 2 and 3).

Tables 2 and 3 also indicate that 55% of the students have 3–5 siblings, with only 14% having more than five siblings. Most students have educated parents; 68% of mothers and 70% of fathers possess bachelor's degrees. Consequently, 67% of the students discuss their academic life with their parents. Intriguingly, 20% of the students never discuss their academic life with their parents, which could be a cause for concern unless this group of students comes from families with divorced or deceased parent(s).

Table 3 suggests that students predominantly choose their major without parental interference; 34% were somewhat uninvolved, and 38% had no parental interference at all. However, it's essential to note the possibility of self-reporting bias in these responses. A significant portion (38%) of students reported health problems, while around 16% indicated having some form of disability and 29% reported experiencing psychological problems, such as stress, anxiety, and depression. The prevalence of

Table 2. Students' demographics.

Variable/ number (%)						
Age						
17–18	34 (9)					
19–22	180 (47)					
23–26	122 (32)					
27 and above	46 (12)					
Gender	Male	146 (38)				
	Female	238 (62)				
Social Status	Single	345 (92)				
	Married	30 (8)				
	Other	–				
Family income	Low	62 (17)				
	Medium	299 (78)				
	High	19 (5)				
Father and mother divorced						
		Yes	19 (5)			
		No	357 (93)			
		Else	7 (2)			
One parent is diseased			Yes	4 (1)		
			No	380 (99)		
Number of siblings				0- 2	119 (31)	
				3- 5	211 (55)	
				6- 8	49 (13)	
				9 +	4 (1)	
At least one parent has a paid job					Yes	338 (88)
					No	46 (12)
					Several times	46 (12)
					A few times	57 (15)
					Never	280 (73)

N = 384.

Table 3. Family and social variables.

Variable/ number (%)					
Mother has a bachelor degree or higher					
Yes	261 (68)				
No	123 (32)				
Father has a bachelor degree or more					
	Yes	268 (70)			
	No	115 (30)			
Parent(s) discuss my academic life					
	Always	99 (26)			
	Sometimes	157 (41)			
	Rarely	50 (13)			
	Never	76 (20)			
Family chose my major					
		Somehow yes	107 (28)		
		Somehow no	130 (34)		
		Did not interfere	146 (38)		
Having health issues			Severally	30 (8)	
			Moderately	62 (17)	
			Minimally	50 (13)	
			Not an issue	238 (62)	
Having disability				Severally	15 (4)
				Moderately	27 (7)
				Minimally	19 (5)
				No disability	322 (84)
Suffering anxiety, stress, or depression					
				Always	11 (3)
				Often	26 (7)
				Sometimes	72 (19)
				Never	272 (71)

N = 384.

psychological distress might be influenced by post-COVID-19 pandemic conditions, as previous studies have reported a considerable number of university students facing post-pandemic psychological challenges (see, for example, Yaghi 2022).

Although the study did not initially articulate a hypothesis regarding gender, the phenomenon of male dropout emerges as a central focus of this investigation. Table 4 delineates the outcomes of three pivotal questions concerning dropout intentions. Notable disparities were observed between male and female students across these queries, with the propensity to withdraw from studies being most pronounced ($\chi^2=$ Male: 9.086, Female: 4.877), thereby substantiating the discourse on gender-related dropout dynamics. Specifically, the proportion of male students considering withdrawal consistently exceeded that of their female counterparts, with figures ranging from 60 to 65 percent. Conversely, only 23.4% of male students reported never contemplating dropout, in stark contrast to 60.8% of female students. These findings furnish empirical substantiation of a skewed distribution of dropout rates between genders; despite a lower overall male student population, their dropout rate is disproportionately higher.

Table 4 indicates that 27.15% of male and 9.6% of female PAPS students have, at some point, opted to change their major or university. The disparity between male and female students is notable, with 58.2% of male students and 81.9% of female students having never made such a change. Regarding contemplation of changing their current major, only 30.1% of male and 49.1% of female students reported never considering this option. Similarly, just 18.4% of male and 36.9% of female PAPS students have never contemplated discontinuing their university studies prior to obtaining a degree. These

Table 4. Intention to dropout among undergraduate students.

Factors influencing dropout	%*	Male; Observed N (%)	Female; Observed N (%)	Total	Expected (male)	Expected (female)	Chi-square contribution
Have you changed your major or school?							
Several times	15.7% M 9.6% F	23 (50%)	23 (50%)	46	20	26	0.346
A few times	26% M 7.9% F	38 (66.6%)	19 (33.3%)	57	25	32	2.184
Never	58.2% M 81.9% F	85 (30.3%)	195 (69.6%)	280	123	157	9.236
p-value= 0.031; df= 2; χ^2= Male: 4.086, Female: 7.877							
How often do you think about changing your current major?							
Very often	13.6% M 7.5% F	20 (52.6%)	18 (47.3%)	38	17	21	0.529
Sometimes	11.6% M 5.8% F	17 (54.8%)	14 (45.1%)	31	14	17	0.429
A few times	18.4% M 7.9% F	27 (58.6%)	19 (41.3%)	46	20	26	1.038
Rarely	26% M 29.4% F	38 (35.1%)	70 (64.8%)	108	47	61	1.723
Never	30.1% M 49.1% F	44 (27.3%)	117 (72.2%)	161	71	90	10.768
p-value= 0.047; df= 4; χ^2= Male: 2.741, Female: 3.252							
How often do you think about leaving the university or quitting your university study?							
Very often	20.5% M 8. 4% F	30 (60%)	20 (40%)	50	22	28	2.981
Sometimes	23.9% M 9.6% F	35 (60.5%)	23 (39.4%)	58	25	33	2.035
A few times	17.1% M 5.8% F	25 (65%)	14 (35%)	39	17	22	3.462
Rarely	19.8% M 39% F	29 (23.7%)	93 (67.2%)	122	53	69	10.769
Never	18.4% M 36.9% F	27 (23.4%)	88 (60.8%)	115	50	65	7.692
p-value= 0.000; df= 4; χ^2= Male: 9.086, Female: 4.877							
Total (384)		146	238	384			

p-value < 0.05;
*Percentage of the male (M) sample which is 146 and the female (F) sample which is 238.

statistics highlight that a significant portion of both genders harbor doubts about their studies, signaling to policymakers and academic administrators that a substantial number of students question the utility, appeal, rigor, or perhaps the robustness of their PAP curriculum. In essence, while male students demonstrate a greater tendency to withdraw or change their major/university, female students exhibit a comparably concerning trend, albeit with less intensity.

These finding may align with prior research from Western countries where, for instance, 38% of students in all majors in American universities change their major at least once during their academic journey (Astorne-Figari and Speer 2019; The Ohio State University 2023; The University of Tulsa 2020). However, in the absence of comparable data regarding PAPS students, a precise comparison remains elusive. While limited studies have been conducted on PAPS students, the available information suggests that dropout rates among PAPS students may follow a similar trend to that of other majors (Brower and Klay 2000). However, within the UAE context, decision-makers in PAPS programs should be particularly concerned about the fact that 38% of PAPS students have considered dropping out of university, and 30% have contemplated changing

their major. These findings hold significant implications for educators, parents, and academic administrators, as these numbers, while in line with the global trend of student dropout across other majors, are relatively high (Gallagher 2019). Subsequent sections will delve deeper into these matters.

To provide a comprehensive view of dropout, Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics of the survey items. According to Table 5, the mean scores of the survey items were above 2.5 out of 5.0, except for seven items, indicating that students generally agreed with the survey questions. This supports the argument that the intention to dropout is complex, with students facing multiple obstacles affecting their retention (Fourie 2020; Hailat et al. 2022). However, mean values alone may not suffice to fully elucidate dropout and test the study's propositions. Hence, after confirming the dataset's suitability for advanced analysis, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted (see Table 6). The results from KMO and Bartlett's test (0.87 and $p < 0.001$, respectively) in Table 6 indicate that the data are suitable for EFA (Field 2018). Following varimax rotation, the six extracted factors account for a cumulative percentage of variance of 78.5%, as indicated by the rotation sums of squared loadings. Nevertheless, as previously highlighted, employing Factor Analysis to identify the determinants of student dropout is fraught with complexities. This arises from the methodology's emphasis on assessing undergraduates' intentions to discontinue their studies, as opposed to the actual incidence of dropout. These intentions are fluid, shaped by personal perceptions, and may not precisely reflect the decisive elements and contexts precipitating the final decision to drop out. Although exploratory factor analysis can uncover factors that potentially influence these intentions, its ability to fully capture the myriad of factors that culminate in dropout is constrained. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that within the social sciences, the concept of "intention" is deemed a valid forecaster of behavior, thereby validating the ensuing analysis (see, Sheeran 2002; Webb and Sheeran 2006).

The labels of the emerged factors in Table 6 align with the content of the survey items that loaded on each factor, namely (1) family and society, (2) economic, (3) program and curriculum, (4) institutional, (5) academic performance of the student, and (6) personal attitude. These factors reveal the intricate nature of dropout, supporting the study's proposition 1. This discovery also lends empirical credence to previous research highlighting the multifaceted nature of dropout (Hailat et al. 2022; Chaudhary 2013). For instance, Nicoletti (2019) emphasized the significance of academic performance and social factors in students' dropout decisions. Mouton, Zhang, and Ertl (2020) reported a substantial relationship between dropout and institutional, social, and personal factors. Although these assertions were made about university students without a specific focus on any major group, they bear relevance because PAPS students are integral to the student body. Consequently, dropout appears to be a complex phenomenon even among PAPS students (see Schultz 2019; Holzer and Lin 2007; Holzer, Xu, and Wang 2007).

To delve deeper into Proposition 1, all survey items that loaded on one factor were amalgamated to form a new construct (variable). These constructed variables were then regressed against the dependent variable, which is a construct of three survey items measuring students' intention to quit (refer to Table 3). While multiple regression models were developed, Table 7 showcases the most suitable model, indicating that 14 independent variables predict PAPS students' dropout ($R2 = 0.62$). Academic performance

Table 5. Mean and standard deviation values for survey items.

Survey item*	Mean out of 5 points; SD**
Items	
1. Most of the days, I feel lonely	2.7 (1.22)
2. My family expects a lot from me	3.3 (0.71)
3. Nobody at home understands me	2.9 (1.03)
4. There are so many problems at home	3.0 (0.68)
5. I feel lost among my large family	2.9 (1.01)
6. Cost of my study is high	4.1 (.094)
7. No scholarships are available	4.3 (1.2)
8. Little or no financial support programs	4.1 (0.88)
9. Educational expenses are above my capacity	4.7 (1.02)
10. Graduating with a degree is not going to make my future life any better	3.6 (1.31)
11. I am not sure how will my study help me achieve my career goals	4.5 (1.04)
12. My work responsibilities hinder my university study	3.1 (1.11)
13. Courses are too difficult for me	2.9 (0.84)
14. Courses are not interesting	4.6 (0.73)
15. Courses are irrelevant to my life outside the university	4.4 (0.96)
16. There are too many general courses and fewer courses from my major	4.6 (0.88)
17. I am not interested in academic activities that take place on campus	3.9 (1.07)
18. I am not interested in social activities that take place on campus	4.0 (1.11)
19. I have only a few friends at the university	2.76 (1.04)
20. I find little support from the advising unit	4.03 (1.12)
21. I rarely sit with my faculty advisor	4.33 (0.83)
22. I find academic advising useless	4.07 (1.06)
23. It is difficult to communicate with university employees	4.18 (0.69)
24. I generally have a bad university experience	2.92 (1.21)
25. I do not belong to this university	2.69 (1.12)
26. I do not belong to my major	2.57 (1.01)
27. I dislike this university	1.99 (0.93)
28. I dislike my major	2.4 (1.22)
29. My current teachers are difficult to approach	2.61 (0.78)
30. My current teachers are arrogant	3.01 (1.02)
31. My current teachers are unhelpful	2.91 (0.88)
32. It is difficult to enjoy my major because courses are taught in foreign language	4.63 (1.03)
33. Teaching is not inspiring	3.11 (0.82)
34. Classes are boring	3.34 (1.06)
35. Courses repeat each other	4.27 (0.78)
36. Teaching methods are ineffective	4.04 (1.05)
37. Teachers use bad teaching methods	3.78 (0.82)
38. My major does not prepare me to work in diplomacy or foreign service	3.77 (1.08)
39. I face difficulties registering for courses	3.23 (0.93)
40. Timetabling is inconvenient	3.11 (1.05)
41. Conditions on campus are not motivating	2.91 (1.11)
42. Teachers give me too much homework	4.17 (0.78)
43. Teachers' expectations are too high	4.06 (1.23)
44. Studying makes me nervous	2.71 (0.83)
45. Coming to classes makes me stressed	2.63 (1.14)
46. My GPA is less than 2.0 out of 4.0	1.76 (1.23)
47. I have at least one academic warning	1.03 (1.61)
48. I do not like studying	2.83 (0.89)
49. I have little motivation to study	3.11 (1.01)
50. I come to some classes late without an excuse	1.72 (1.23)
51. I repeatedly skip classes without an excuse	1.97 (1.03)
52. I was engaged in at least one fight at this university	1.06 (1.33)
53. I do not know why I study in my current major	3.17 (0.79)
54. Society expects too much from me	4.11 (0.89)
55. People around me expect me to become a diplomat	4.07 (1.02)
N = 384	

*All items were measured using five-point Likert scale; strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree. A number above 2.5 indicates an agreement with the corresponding statement.

Table 6. Factor loading.

Item/ factor	1: Family & society	2: Economic	3: Program and curriculum	4: Institutional	5: Academic performance	6: Personal attitude
2	.530					
3	.788					
4	.804					
54	.865					
55	.853					
6		.662				
7		.801				
8		.878				
9		.654				
13			.847			
14			.754			
16			.529			
26			.555			
29			.804			
30			.821			
31			.792			
32			.761			
34			.646			
35			.712			
37			.797			
20				.841		
21				.641		
22				.750		
23				.753		
24				.714		
39				.828		
40				.896		
41				.822		
42					.710	
43					.829	
46					.794	
47					.824	
48					.799	
44						.883
45						.763
50						.890
51						.813

*Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings- Cumulative= 78.533; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy= 0.878; Approx, Chi-Square in Bartlett's Test of Sphericity= 986.697, df= 528, Sig. <0.001.

emerged as the most robust predictor (B = .436, b = .412), followed closely by economic variables (B = .412, b = .403), program and curriculum factors (B = .411, b = .395), and personal attitude of the student (B = .357, b = .309). Students' psychological well-being was correlated with dropout (B = .312, b = .251) alongside two family factors: family income (B = −.344, b = .310) and family and social influence (B = .347, b = .312). Additionally, Table 7 underscores the significance of institutional factors (B = .303, b = .299), as well as the variable indicating whether students ever changed their major (B = .362, b = .315). Gender emerged as a significant predictor of dropout (B = .284, b = .211), suggesting the need for further studies to explore and compare dropout patterns among male and female students in PAPS majors. The role of family and parents in dropout is evident, as parents' involvement was positively correlated with dropout (B = .212, b = .214). Moreover, aspects of the home environment, such as a deceased parent (B = .211, b = .183) and parents' divorce (B = .207, b = .202), influenced dropout decisions. How a major was chosen also played a role (B = −.264, b = −.222).

Table 7. Multiple regression model.

Model summary (dependent variable: intention to dropout[a])

Best model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta (b)	t-test	Sig.*
Constant	50.01	5.0	0.227	10.017	0.002
Age	0.166	0.088	0.103	4.145	0.182
Gender	0.284	0.137	0.211	1.112	0.006*
Social status	−0.277	0.108	0.039	−2.36	0.303
Family income	−0.344	0.083	−0.310	−1.532	0.000*
Father and mother divorced	0.207	0.059	0.212	1.290	0.022*
One parent is diseased	0.211	0.200	0.183	1.104	0.001*
Number of siblings	0.185	0.101	0.085	2.661	0.117
A parent has a paid job	−0.133	0.166	−0.165	1.171	0.121
Major/university changed	0.362	0.059	0.315	2.201	0.000*
Mother's education	0.395	0.171	0.044	2.522	0.074
Father's education	0.106	0.154	0.076	0.974	0.111
Parents' engagement in student's life	0.212	0.071	0.214	1.541	0.037*
Choosing a major	−0.264	0.113	−0.222	1.007	0.044*
Having health issues	0.151	0.086	0.058	1.027	0.121
Having disability	0.125	0.183	0.093	1.491	0.510
Stress, anxiety, or depression	0.312	0.081	0.251	1.073	0.008*
Family and social factors	0.347	0.107	0.312	1.111	0.000*
Economic factor	0.412	0.885	0.403	2.004	0.002*
Programmatic and curriculum factor	0.411	0.931	0.395	1.703	0.000*
Institutional factor	0.303	0.775	0.299	2.062	0.017*
Academic performance factor	0.436	0.681	0.412	2.317	0.011*
Personal attitude factor	0.357	0.911	0.309	1.109	0.000*

R = 0.75; R2 = 0.62; Adjusted R2 = 0.42; DF= 360; F = 12.16; Sig.= .000; Std. Error= 2.825

[a]The dependent variable was measured by three questions: Have you ever thought about changing your current major? Have you ever thought about dropping out of university? Have you ever made a plan to drop out of school?
*Significant at $p < 0.05$; b (standardized coefficient) is reported in the discussion of this table.

The findings presented in Table 7 substantiate proposition 1 of the study. Moreover, these results support Doll, Eslami, and Walters (2013) argument, as curriculum and institutional variables in Table 7 can act as push factors, making students' university experience less pleasant. Health issues, disability, and family dynamics serve as pull factors, enticing students toward dropout. Meanwhile, students' personal attitudes, including tardiness, absence, and disengagement from university life (see Finn 1993; Lehr et al. 2004), serve as failing factors that bring students closer to dropping out.

In alignment with previous research by Fortin et al. (2006), Salim (2019), and Hailat et al. (2022), the current study underscores the pivotal role of economic factors as predictors of dropout. Economic factors encompass both family income and a student's inability to afford tuition and other study-related costs (refer to Tables 2 and 3). Consequently, policymakers must intensify efforts and devise efficient strategies to provide alternatives for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or those unable to pay their tuition due to various reasons.

However, it is important to note a deviation in the study's findings concerning students' dropout in the UAE compared to previous research. While Salim (2019) and Chaudhary (2013) emphasized the significance of family and social aspects, particularly family size and parents' employment status, the current study does not support these assertions, as Table 6 indicates no significant relationship between these variables and dropout. This disparity in findings could be attributed to two themes: the time lapse and the reference students. The aforementioned studies were conducted in schools, not

universities, and some of the findings are a decade old. Nevertheless, future studies, especially those focusing on PAPS students, are imperative to further explore these aspects. Following the analysis of findings from undergraduate data, the subsequent section of the study will concentrate on analyzing the responses of graduate students in PAPS.

Analyzing the responses of graduate dropouts

This study delved into the experiences of graduate students who had already dropped out, offering a unique perspective compared to surveys on undergraduate students' intentions. The data, derived from 18 semi-structured interviews with graduate dropouts from different PAPS master's programs in UAE universities, provide valuable insights into the reasons behind their decisions (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, and Terry, 2019). Thematic analysis was conducted manually by performing the following tasks: familiarization with the responses to identify the main ideas, patterns, and meanings in the data; coding the responses; theme generating by reviewing all the codes, organizing them into broader themes and patterns, looking for connections, similarities, and differences among the codes and grouping them accordingly, and giving each theme a descriptive name that captures its essence; theme reviewing and development by checking if themes are coherent, consistent, and meaningful, and refining and revising themes by adding, removing, or merging them as needed in accordance to the propositions of the study; theme definition by providing a clear and concise definition of each theme and explaining what it represents and how it reflects its core concept; and reporting by presenting the themes in a logical order and supporting them with evidence from the data, and discussing the implications, limitations, and contributions of the analysis (Castleberry and Nolen 2018; Braun and Clarke 2019). This analysis revealed six significant elements (themes) influencing dropout: (1) family and society, (2) economic, (3) program and curriculum, (4) institutional, (5) academic performance of the student, and (6) personal attitude. These elements are elaborated below and represented in Figure 1.

First: economic elements

Economic concerns emerged as crucial push forces for dropout, encompassing high program costs, the inability to afford tuition fees, limited employment benefits relative to study expenses, and a scarcity of financial aid options. Many students faced the burden
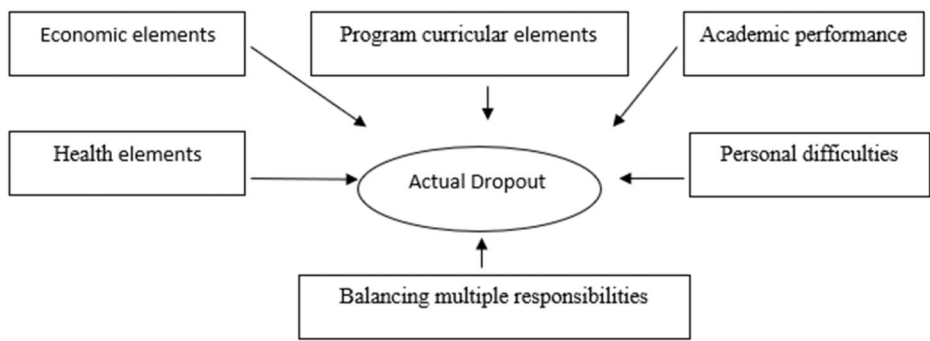
Figure 1. Elements influenced dropped out of PAPS graduate students.

of funding their education without employer support, leading to financial stress and eventual dropout.

Second: program curricular elements

Graduate dropouts cited various program-related challenges, including the inflexible curriculum lacking practical components, language barriers, daunting thesis requirements, and inadequate guidance (see, Yaghi and Alibeli 2014). The rigidity of the curriculum, limited course options, and the emphasis on theoretical courses left many students dissatisfied. Language of instruction also played a role, with Arabic-speaking students feeling isolated and uncomfortable in English-taught classes. Additionally, the thesis requirements, both in terms of writing and defending proposals, proved daunting, leading some students to abandon their studies.

Third: balancing multiple responsibilities

Time constraints were a common theme among dropouts, with both universities and employers being inflexible, making it difficult for students to balance work, home, and study responsibilities. Students faced challenges attending classes due to work commitments and found it overwhelming to juggle multiple roles without adequate support.

Fourth: health elements

Health-related issues, including psychological distress, anxiety, and pregnancy, posed significant barriers to academic focus and commitment. Some students reported feeling anxious and mentally unprepared for the demands of the program, leading them to reconsider their decision to pursue a master's degree.

Fifth: academic performance

Poor academic performance, often reflected in low GPAs, further exacerbated students' struggles. The difficulty of the coursework, particularly in areas like research methods and public administration theory, led to dissatisfaction and discouragement among students, impacting their ability to continue.

Sixth: personal difficulties

Personal challenges, such as lack of family support, parental pressure, marital conflicts, or self-confidence issues, hindered students' motivation and commitment. These personal struggles affected their overall university experience and made it challenging for them to persevere.

This qualitative analysis highlights that graduate and undergraduate students are influenced by similar forces, albeit experienced differently. While undergraduates did not face time management issues, balancing responsibilities became a significant concern for graduate students. Additionally, universities and PAPS departments play a pivotal

role in shaping students' experiences. Creating supportive environments, addressing financial concerns, and offering academic and social support are vital for student retention. Academic managers and institutions must collaborate to establish policies fostering a student-centric culture, ensuring students' success and degree completion. Future research should explore existing governance systems and policies within UAE higher education institutions to enhance PAPS students' retention and graduation rates.

Conclusion and limitations

This study has delved into the intricate phenomenon of dropout among PAPS students, with the aim of shedding light on the complexities surrounding this issue. Through a thorough exploration, two essential propositions were scrutinized, drawing insights from both the survey administered to undergraduate students and the interviews conducted with graduate students. The findings illuminate critical aspects of the dropout problem within PAPS programs, emphasizing the pivotal role that universities play in exacerbating this challenge.

As one of the few studies focusing on PAPS students, this research offers empirical evidence concerning the intricate nature of dropout. It also provides support for the arguments of two prominent theories: integration and engagement theory (Spady 1971; Tinto 2012) and pull, push, and falling out theory (Doll, Eslami, and Walters 2013). By doing this, the study demonstrates that these theories (a) can be applied to specific majors, including PAPS, providing a valid explanation of dropout in general and within a particular major; (b) since the findings from the UAE align with those from other contexts, both theories can be suitable to explain and predict dropout in different settings; (c) dropout is a global phenomenon, influenced by forces such as family, economic, personal, academic, and institutional factors that impact student retention in PAPS in the UAE, as well as students in other majors in different countries. However, it is crucial to replicate this study by surveying PAPS students and students from other majors within either the same country or a similar context for more accurate generalization and comparison.

Based on the findings of this study, the average student who drops out of PAPS programs in the UAE is typically characterized by several key factors. These students often face significant personal and academic challenges, including balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities. They are usually full-time employees with limited time for academic pursuits, which exacerbates their struggle to keep up with the demands of their studies. Additionally, financial constraints and institutional rigidity, such as inflexible class schedules and inadequate funding opportunities, further contribute to their decision to drop out.

The analysis provided here indicates that students at risk of dropping out are those who experience a combination of personal, academic, and financial pressures. To mitigate these risks, universities should consider implementing the following intervention strategies:

- Flexible Scheduling: Offering more flexible class schedules and lecture timings to accommodate working students.

- Financial Support: Establishing multiple funding avenues, such as scholarships and assistantships, to alleviate financial burdens.
- Curricular Adjustments: Incorporating more practical components into the curriculum, reducing the emphasis on theoretical material, and offering alternative tracks for students who prefer not to write a thesis.
- Support Services: Providing robust academic and personal support services, including counseling and mentorship programs, to help students navigate their challenges.

To address concerns about the potential depletion of a crucial source of human power in the UAE's public sector, decision-makers need to act upon the findings of this study and the mapping of factors more significant to PAPS programs. One key revelation is the significant impact of institutional rigidity and inadequate funding on the attractiveness of PAPS programs, especially for graduate students. While the balancing act between work, family, and academics is undeniably a personal challenge, universities, specifically departments and program administrations, wield considerable influence in either easing or intensifying this struggle. A more flexible approach in designing lectures, class timings, and the theoretical components of courses could provide students with greater opportunities to maintain a harmonious life balance. Additionally, universities should proactively establish multiple funding avenues, such as scholarships and assistantships, to alleviate the financial burden on students. Unlike doctoral students who actively engage in research projects, many PAPS working students are full-time employees, leaving them with limited time for academic pursuits.

Curricular issues, such as the language of study and the structure of study plans, are areas where academic managers can directly intervene to enhance the student experience. The requirement of writing and defending a master's thesis emerged as a daunting theme leading to dropout, particularly as many students perceive their master's degree as a means to acquire practical skills rather than engaging in extensive academic research (Yaghi 2008; Yaghi and Alabed 2021). Incorporating a more practical component, reducing the emphasis on theoretical material, and offering alternative tracks for students who prefer not to write a thesis could significantly improve program attractiveness. For undergraduate curricula, it is imperative that departments of PAP rejuvenate their course offerings by incorporating modern content and engaging pedagogies. These courses should not only preserve the pertinence of political science and public affairs doctrines in relation to contemporary issues but also promote a vigorous synergy between theoretical constructs and practical application. The principle of melding academic theory with real-world practice is well-established; however, this study underscores the necessity of allocating time and resources to the continual refinement of educational programs. It is paramount to heed student feedback, such as end-of-semester evaluations of courses and instructors, employing this feedback constructively to advance both the curriculum content and pedagogical approaches.

While this study focused specifically on PAPS students in the UAE, the findings have broader implications that warrant further investigation. The dropout phenomenon, influenced by factors such as family, economic, personal, academic, and institutional forces, is not necessarily unique to the UAE. Similar patterns have been observed in

other contexts, suggesting that the results of this study may be applicable to programs in other countries as well (see, Aina et al. 2022; Pusztai, Fényes, and Kovács 2022). However, it is crucial to conduct comparative studies across various majors and different country contexts to validate these findings and ensure accurate generalization. Researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative studies across various majors, particularly in high-demand fields such as PAPS, management, and STEM, where dropout rates persist. Decision-makers are urged to revitalize PAPS programs, enhance curricula, and bolster student support, with particular emphasis on financial empowerment. The language of instruction, thesis requirements, and course content need reconsideration, with a focus on adapting these aspects to the practical needs and time constraints of working students.

Future research endeavors should delve deeper into the quality and relevance of master's theses, assessing their contributions to the field. Additionally, exploring how students perceive the utility of their academic degrees could provide valuable insights. Larger and more diverse samples, as well as comparative studies across universities and programs, are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student dropout and can offer specific insights into each university's unique academic programs and their impact on dropout rates.

Ethical approval

Notes on contributor

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