

Beyond university dropout. An approach to university transfer

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ABSTRACT

Degree transfer is understood as the increasingly common phenomenon among students of changing university degrees or university, especially after the first or second years of the degree. The profile of students who transfer (3,861 students, 8.3% of students) is constructed based on microdata from the University Pre-enrolment Register of Catalonia and an explanatory model is validated by means of Multivariate Logistic Regression.

Transfer refers to both changing the area of knowledge or the university and occurs most frequently in engineering, experimental sciences and social sciences degrees. The profile of the student who transfers is male, does not balance paid employment with studying, has completed baccalaureate in a private or a state-funded private school, and is upper middle class with both parents with a higher-level education working in higher management positions or liberal occupations. His level of use of social networks and digital communication tools is very high.

KEYWORDS

University dropout; first-cycle university students; access to education; choosing a degree

Introduction

Students admitted to university face a very broad, heterogenous offer of degrees, quite often with very little differentiation among them. In the academic year 2016–17, students enrolled in the Catalan university system had to choose among 691 degrees, their decision conditioning not only their educational, but also their professional future.

Some of these degrees are vocational and others have very clear, defined educational objectives. However, a large majority of them do not have a clear vocational orientation and/or their educational and professional objectives can seem insufficiently differentiated and imprecise to students (Espinoza et al. 2017; Sánchez 2002; Soria et al. 2006). In these cases, there is a phenomenon understood as a manifestation of university dropout, which is changing degrees or transferring, and is particularly given after the first or second year of study.

Different studies highlight that many of the empirical studies on the explanatory factors of dropout have not differentiated between the different types of dropout (Corominas 2001; DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak 2005; Gaviria 2008; Larsen, Sommersel, and Larsen 2013; Tinto 1975; Villar et al. 2012). This has led to blindness in the empirical results obtained and the implications for academic and university policy, given that reasons for dropout and its academic, social and economic consequences can be fundamentally different depending on whether the student has dropped out completely or has transferred.

Transfer can be analysed from different angles. On the one hand, from the perspective of economic equilibrium, changing degrees enables a better balance between student demand and academic offer, and as such can be seen as a positive phenomenon. On the other hand, university degrees are not goods for general consumption, but are limited and subsidised by public money. Therefore, from Corominas's (2001) social perspective, transfer can be viewed negatively, in that it could signify a mismatch between the student and the space they occupy at university, and as such a waste of resources – a worrying economic impact if the student does not finish their degree.

In the context of the economic crisis of the last few years, with increased calls for efficiency in public investment and spending, university transfer is seen from the second perspective. Within the general context of the education system, transfer is considered as an inefficiency of higher education establishments involving some undesirable economic costs, the inefficient use of resources and funding, and even a cost in terms of the prestige of the establishment. It is also a waste of personal resources, time and money involving an opportunity cost (in a context of restricted admission) given that another potential student could have completed that particular degree.

To this effect, the quality guarantee systems for Spanish university degrees assume that a high dropout rate among students (including transfer) is attributable to a low-quality degree and little interest in its educational content, or to aspects related to the labour market insertion of the degree. Consequently, dropout rate is used as an indirect indicator of quality without considering the type of dropout being addressed (Corominas 2001; Larsen, Sommersel, and Larsen 2013; Villar et al. 2012; Yorke 1998).

Within this context, the aim of this paper is to delve deeper into some aspects that enable us to define the differences between the types of university dropout, focusing particularly on transfer from the students' perspective: Is there a single type of dropout or is there a need to distinguish between dropout and transfer to increase the effectiveness of university academic policies? Are there academic, family and economic variables, among others, that explain transfer? Are some degrees more predisposed to transfer?

More specifically, the aims of this paper are (i) to contribute to the debate on the concept and manifestations of dropout; (ii) to identify the profile of the students most given to transfer; (iii) to approach the explanatory factors of transfer, making a clear distinction between students who definitively leave their university studies, given the obvious differences between the motives for and effects of dropout; and (iv) to approach some of the implications of transfer for policies and actions at the institutional level.

Basis of the research: from dropout to transfer

University dropout emerged as an object of study in the 1960s and 1970s with Tinto's interactionist theory, which evolved over time promoting the development of a large part of later theoretical models which attempt to understand and explain a clearly complex, multidimensional phenomenon that goes beyond the theoretical to intervene in the policies, actions and studies carried out by universities and countries around the world (Gairín et al. 2014).

The purely administrative definition of dropout¹, which does not differentiate between definitive and partial dropout – does not enable approaching students' differing situations and trajectories; in other words, if they are dropping out definitively or if they are transferring within the university system (Abarca and Sánchez 2005; Corominas 2001; Elias 2008; Hoxdhaugen, 2009; Lassibille and Navarro Gómez 2009; Villar 2010; Villar, Hernández, and García 2017).

Strictly speaking, partial dropout refers to two different circumstances. The first is understood as the interruption of a degree, where the student does not enrol for the next academic year of the degree they have been studying. And the second is transferring or changing the degree studied, where the student decides to drop out of one degree to enrol on a different one. The difference between the two types of dropout is important as it can be produced for distinct reasons and

circumstances and as such is the outcome of different processes that call for applying specific strategies and actions. This paper is concerned with the second type of dropout.

Both the conceptual and empirical analysis of transfer emerges from within the context of studies on dropout and/or academic results (Arce, Crespo, and Míguez-Álvarez 2015; Corominas 2001; Villar 2010), and more precisely from analyses that aim to describe the circumstances which give rise to a student dropping out of the degree they are currently doing before having completed it (European Union 2015).

In its 2013–2014 report on the Spanish university system, time the Ministry of Education incorporated the difference between the dropout rate and the transfer rate after the first year of study for the first time. However, it was not until the 2016 report that the use of the transfer rate was generalised. This rate was defined as an indicator of the percentage of students in a cohort of new intake students who enrolled on other degree programmes in the following two years.

According to these data, the average percentage for university dropout in Spain in 2016 was 32.7%, and 27.6% in Catalonia. The transfer rate, obviously, was somewhat lower, at 11.2% for the Spanish average and 11.7% for the Catalan public universities. Regarding branches of knowledge, the degrees with the highest dropout rates were in the area of arts and humanities (45.9%). For science degrees the percentage was lower at 16.6%, confirming previous studies that show the wide variation in the percentages for this phenomenon depending on the different degrees (Ortiz and Dehon 2013; Cabrera et al. 2006; Lassibille and Navarro Gómez 2008). The analysis by the different academic years shows that this phenomenon mainly occurs after the first year, with rates of 22.1% for dropout and 8.4% for transfer, while for the second year these figures are 9.1% and 3%, respectively.

Hovdhaugen is the researcher who has focused most on this phenomenon at an international level. An *ad hoc* survey of Norwegian undergraduates showed that more than 50% of them had dropped out of the degree they had initially chosen, but that the majority had transferred rather than definitively left higher education (only 17% dropped out of higher education without completing a degree) (Hovdhaugen 2009).

A later study (Hovdhaugen 2011), which aimed to analyse the effects of the Norwegian university reforms associated with the EEES, concluded that while the dropout and transfer rates remained high post-reform, the latter had reduced considerably.

In a paper that reviewed and summarised some of the published empirical studies on university dropout in the European context between 2000 and 2013, Larsen, Sommersel, and Larsen (2013) investigated the factors that differentiated the types of dropout. Of interest to this paper, and focusing on the explanatory factors of transfer, in this paper sociodemographic factors are shown to have significant effects: having parents with a high educational and professional level with university degrees increases the probability of transfer. The factors associated with academic performance and the academic demands of the degree, however, do not affect the likelihood of transfer (students who transfer do so in the first years of the degree and their previous academic performance is either the same as or higher than that of the other students). And the factors that have a more significant effect on transfer are either related to the content of the degree and its outcomes, or to the students' motivations and objectives regarding the degree they are studying. Thus, the students with clear educational objectives are significantly less likely to transfer, while this characteristic is much less significant in other types of dropout.

There are few Spanish studies on university transfer and this phenomenon is only addressed in a tangential way in studies that focus on dropout. Among these are Villar's studies on the reasons for university transfer among Valencian students, carried out by means of an *ad hoc* survey (2010) and an analysis focused on transfer from the perspective of the degree (2017). The results of these studies show the enormous divergence between the different degrees and the large heterogeneity among institutions. They also evidence the increase in the number of students who change from one degree to another as a transfer within the university system (Villar 2010), either because they had made the wrong choice due to a large difference in the level of difficulty between upper

secondary school (or other pre-university educational circumstances) and university, or because they could not balance studying this degree with other occupations, or because of a mismatch between student and degree due it not being their first option, among other reasons.

In summary, the findings of the empirical studies carried out in the European context highlight the differences in the possible explanatory factors underlying the various types of dropout (Iam-On and Boongoen 2017; Larsen, Sommersel, and Larsen 2013; Respondek et al. 2017). They therefore contribute empirical evidence of the necessary distinction between dropout that leads to transferring between degrees/higher education establishments, and dropout that leads to decisively leaving the higher education system.

This paper gathers the approaches and findings of previous research and aims to contribute to the conceptual and empirical debate in Spain, addressing the study of university transfer from the perspective of the students who started their degrees in the Catalan public university system in 2016, analysing their demographic and academic profile and proposing an explanatory model that acknowledges the circumstances and trajectories of an increasingly current topic within academic discourse.

Method

To achieve the objectives of this paper, the dimensions of the phenomenon and the demographic and academic profiles of the Catalan students that transfer are first determined. An explanatory model is then constructed of the basic demographic, socioeconomic, family and academic variables that help to predict changing university degrees.

Population and Instrument

The study is based on microdata from the University Pre-enrolment Register of Catalonia² for the academic year 2016–17. This microdata contains the information registers³ of the 46, 531 students assigned to a degree through the university pre-enrolment process for all Catalan public universities. Of these, 8.3% (3,861 students) had started a degree in the previous two years and had re-entered the Catalan university pre-enrolment system to either begin studying a different degree or the same degree but in a different university. These are the students who transfer their university studies.

Table 1 shows the basic data of the variables used. Of the total sample, 44% of the students were men, mainly between 18 and 21 years old (average age 19.84 years). Of these 61.8% were from the province of Barcelona and 20.8% from the other Catalan provinces.

Bearing in mind the variables cited in the bibliographical review, the following variables were included in the model: sociodemographic variables (sex, age, province of residence and paid work); social variables regarding their background (parents' educational level and professional category)⁴; and academic variables (order of preference of degrees, concurrence with the type of baccalaureate, the type of upper secondary education school, education counselling on university studies and reasons for choosing the degree).

A two-level empirical study was carried out to analyse the objectives of the paper. First, a bivariate descriptive analysis was made of the variables under study, according to whether the student transferred or not, giving a first approximation of their association measures. Second, an explanatory, predictive model of the phenomenon was constructed by means of a Multivariate Logistic Regression (MLR), which identified the demographic, socioeconomic, family, personal, and academic trajectory variables that impact on transfer.

The MLR procedure used (SPSS, v.22) automatically generates new variables for the multicategorical variables based on the contrast indicator, using the first reference category. The regression equation and the model proposed were constructed complementarily with the introduction method and the forward step with the aim of evaluating and discarding possible interactions and confusion factors among the independent variables (Hosmer and Lemeshow 1989).

Table 1. Description of the variables of the model, the reference categories and the bivariate indexes.

Dependent Variable		Frequency	%	
Transfer	No (0)	42,670	91.7	
	Yes (1)	3,861	8.3	
Independent Variables				
Quantitative Variables		Average	Typical Deviation.	t (a)
Age	No transfer	20.107	4.925	3.340***
	Yes transfer	19.841	1.760	
Admission mark	No transfer	8.699	2.082	-7.451***
	Yes transfer	8.962	2.103	
Dichotomous Qualitative Variables		Frequency	%	Chi square (b)
Sex	Man (*)	20,459	44.0	20.394***
	Women	26,072	56.0	
Paid work	No (*)	31,236	67.1	25.857***
	Yes	15,295	32.9	
Concurrence	No (*)	10,370	22.3	5.521*
	Yes	36,090	77.7	
Order of assignment	Not 1st preference (*)	8,039	17.3	33.940***
	1st preference	38,492	82.7	
Multicategorical Qualitative Variables		Frequency	%	Chi square (b)
Province	Barcelona (*)	28,743	61.8	
	Girona (1)	3,741	8.0	
	Lleida (2)	2,120	4.6	
	Tarragona (3)	3,830	8.2	
	Baleares-Valencia (4)	2,963	6.4	
	Rest of Spain (5)	3,873	8.3	
	Outside Spain (6)	1,261	2.7	69.567***
Parents' educational level	No qualifications or primary level education (*)	4,035	8.7	
	EGB (Compulsory education to 14 years old) or 1st level vocational training (1)	7,647	16.4	
	Baccalaureate/ 2nd level vocational training (2)	12,210	26.2	
	Diploma holder/Technical engineer (3)	5,371	11.5	
	Doctor, Graduate, Engineer or Architect (4)	14,671	31.5	
	NS / NC (5)	2,597	5.6	129.909***
	Non-qualified job (*)	1,931	4.1	
Parents' occupation	Qualified job (1)	20,819	44.7	
	Technician (2)	5,961	12.8	
	Director, manager (3)	8,581	18.4	
	NS/NC (4)	9,239	19.9	80.698***
	Teachers, fairs, websites, etc. (*)	3,610	7.8	
Education counselling when choosing the degree	Family members, friends or others (1)	8,094	17.4	
	Professional opportunities (2)	1,676	3.6	
	Own initiative, vocation (3)	24,450	52.5	
	Interest in content of degree (4)	8,701	18.7	8.064+
	Admission mark (*)	892	1.9	
Reason for choosing the degree	Professional expectations (1)	13,603	29.2	
	Interest in content of degree (2)	29,444	63.3	
	Other/ NS-NC (3)	2592	5.6	37.705***
	State (*)	28996	63.2	
	Private (1)	7297	15.9	
Type of secondary school	State-funded private (2)	9588	20.9	23.195***

(*) Reference category; (a) Student's t test for the comparison of means; (b) Contrast Chi square; ***: $p < 0,001$; **: $p < 0,01$; *: $p < 0,05$; + $p < 0,010$.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the University Pre-enrolment Register of Catalonia, 2016 microdata . University Admissions Office (OAU). Inter-University Council of Catalonia (CIC).

Considering the theoretical approaches and the empirical findings presented previously, the main hypotheses formulated are:

(H1) The variables related to sociodemographic and student background factors will have a positive effect on transfer.

(H2) The variables related to previous academic results will have a lesser or a non-existent effect on transfer.

(H3) The factors related to the content of the degree, and students' motivations and objectives will have a positive effect on transfer.

Results

The bivariate analyses between transfer and the independent variables considered show a statistically significant relationship. This analysis describes a group of students where the percentage of men transferring is statistically greater than the percentage of women, despite more women gaining admission to university than men. In addition, in this group transfer is more frequent among students from families with a medium-high socio-professional status and educational level, where the parents have a university education and have technical or professional jobs. Among the students who transferred, 40% of the parents had a university level education and more than half of both progenitors were employed in jobs linked to having university qualifications (management or higher management in companies or public institutions, expert technicians, liberal professionals associated with a university qualification, or qualified workers in the services sector). Therefore, they are students who do not depend on public grants but are from families for whom the economic cost of their changing degree in the first or second year at university is not very problematic either in terms of being admitted to or remaining in the university system.

On analysing their presence in the labour market, the data confirm that students who transfer do not do paid work or they work less than 15 h a week (almost 80%), and again this population is different from that of students who are admitted to university for the first time (almost 30% work 15 h or more per week).

Regarding their academic trajectory prior to entering university, the findings agree with European results in that performance in secondary school and university entry qualifications are higher among students who transfer: their mark to enter university⁵ is 8.96, and most of them (86.1%) were able to get onto their first-choice degree and into their preferred university. Moreover, most of the students who transfer have completed baccalaureate (88.7%), with a very high percentage (73%) coming from a scientific or technological baccalaureate and the rest from humanities and social sciences baccalaureates (23.3%), and almost 40% of these at a private or a state-funded private school.

Access to computer equipment, and knowledge and use of social networks and new technologies are high among students who transfer: 96.9% have a PC and Internet connection; 75.8% have a high level of knowledge of office systems; almost 85% state that they have good or very good knowledge of the platform Moodle; 74.6% use digital tools for sharing information in the cloud; and more than 65% state that they regularly use social networks.

As previous research has shown, the empirical evidence points to the importance of students' motivation and interest in career counselling and the content of the degree being studied, to understand the phenomenon of transfer. Thus, the analysis of the opinion the students have of the stakeholder that most helped them to take the decision to transfer their studies, and their motivations and reasons for deciding on one degree rather than another, reflect this importance. According to students, the two principal motivations that influenced their decision as to which degree to go back to study were their own initiative and interest in the content of the degree. These two motivations were chosen by more than 70% of the students. And regarding the reasons put forward for deciding on the new degree, the most frequently mentioned were intrinsic motivations: the interest they show in the content of the degree and their professional expectations.

Table 2 shows the results according to the change, or not, of area of knowledge and university for students who transfer. To this effect, 45.2% of the students who transfer do not change the area. With respect to changing the university, it is important to note that almost a third of students who transfer started their degrees outside the Catalan public university system (in universities in other autonomous communities, in private universities, or with distance universities). Therefore, this is a large

Table 2. Behaviour of the students who transfer in relation to the area of knowledge and to changing university to do the new degree.

		Change of area of knowledge		Total
Change of university		NO	YES	
Remain in the same university	% in Change of university	44.7%	55.3%	100.0%
	% in Change of area	36.8%	37.7%	37.2%
Change university	% in Change of university	36.8%	63.2%	100.0%
	% in Change of area	29.1%	41.4%	35.7%
Starting the previous degree outside the Catalan public system	% in Change of university	57.6%	42.4%	100.0%
	% in Change of area	34.1%	20.9%	26.8%
Total	%	45.2%	54.5%	100.0%

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the University Pre-enrolment Register of Catalonia, 2016 microdata . University Admissions Office (OAU). Inter-University Council of Catalonia (CIC).

group of students who, having started degrees outside the Catalan public university system, are later absorbed into it.

Regarding the more specific elements of the relationship between the two aspects, the evidence shows a correspondence between changing university and changing the area of knowledge: 63.2% of those who changed university also moved into a new area of knowledge.

On analysing the university degrees by broad areas of knowledge, the results show a perfect symbiosis between the degrees left and the degrees transferred to. First, the degrees left most are in the area of engineering and telecommunications (23.5%), and degrees in the area of health (13.4%), economics and business (12.0%) and humanities (10.4%) complete the list of the four degrees most frequently left. Regarding the new degree, because almost half the students who transfer do so to degrees within the same area of knowledge, the degrees transferred to are in the same areas. Only on degrees in the area of knowledge of engineering and telecommunications are there students' losses – representing 16.4% of the new degrees chose – in favour of the other three main areas of knowledge: health (17.4%), humanities (14.8%) and economics and business (12.3%). A more detailed analysis shows how student who leave degrees in the areas of knowledge of engineering and telecommunications either transfer to degrees in the same area of knowledge (53.9%) or to degrees in the areas of economics and business, audio-visuals and experimental sciences.

Table 3 shows the results of the explanatory model proposed. Most of the variables included can be seen to have a statistically significant effect on transfer. Only concurrence – or not – between the degree and the type of baccalaureate previously studied and the methods of education counselling when choosing the degree have no significant effect.

The global measures of goodness of fit shown in Table 4 indicate a good fit of the model, and an improvement compared to the null model.

The results of the explanatory model validate the observations highlighted in the analysis of the profile of the sample. Regarding the variables that have a direct, significant effect⁶, parental educational level and geographic mobility are shown to be important, thus validating the first hypothesis of the paper. More specifically, in households where the parents have a university diploma or a degree the probability of transfer increases by 1.701 and 1.515, respectively. The autonomous community of residence also has a significant influence illustrated by the effect a change of autonomous community has on transfer: the probability of transfer increases by 1.457 if the student's residence is outside Catalonia, and by 1.38 if they live in autonomous communities nearer to Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands).

Other sociographic variables point to how transfer is less frequent among women than among men, and among students who reconcile paid work and studying, and is markedly less frequent among students from households where the parents are not in paid work, or where this information is not provided.

Table 3. Results of the MLR analysis of the explanatory variables of transfer.

Parameter B		Standard Error	Wald Statistic	Exp(B) [OR]	C.I. 95% for OR	
					Lower	Higher
Sex Woman	↓.158	.035	20.793	.854***	.798	.914
Concurrence Yes	↓.047	.041	1.330	.954	.880	1.034
Order Assigned 1st preference	↓.301	.049	37.462	1.351***	1.227	1.487
Province			66.065			
(Barcelona reference)						
Girona (1)	.209	.063	11.082	1.233***	1.090	1.394
Lleida (2)	↓.082	.088	.857	.921	.775	1.096
Tarragona (3)	↓.076	.065	1.350	1.079	.949	1.226
Baleares-Valencia (4)	.324	.066	23.929	1.382***	1.214	1.574
Rest of Spain (5)	.377	.059	40.365	1.457***	1.298	1.637
Outside Spain (6)	.262	.103	6.401	1.299*	1.061	1.591
Paid Work Yes	↓.109	.038	8.243	.896**	.832	.966
Family educational level			50.355			
(No qualifications/primary level education)						
EGB or FP 1st level (1)	.226	.083	7.324	1.253**	1.064	1.475
Baccalaureate/FP 2nd level (2)	.345	.079	19.257	1.411***	1.210	1.646
Diploma holder/Technical degree (3)	.531	.087	37.570	1.701***	1.435	2.016
Doctor, Graduate, Engineer, Architect (4)	.415	.081	25.985	1.515***	1.291	1.777
NS / NC (5)	.108	.111	.936	1.114	.895	1.386
Family occupation			24.767			
(no qualifications reference)						
Qualified (1)	↓.262	.087	9.024	.770**	.649	.913
Technicians (2)	↓.182	.099	3.354	.834	.686	1.013
Directors, managers (3)	↓.170	.094	3.256	.844	.702	1.015
No job/NS-NC (4)	↓.385	.093	17.064	.680***	.567	.817
Education counselling when choosing the degree			4.485			
(Teachers, fairs, websites and other references)						
Family members, friends and others (1)	↓.058	.078	.558	.943	.810	1.099
Professional opportunities (2)	.039	.111	.122	1.040	.837	1.292
Own initiative, vocation (3)	↓.064	.071	.812	.938	.816	1.078
Interest in content of degree (4)	.015	.077	.037	1.015	.873	1.180
Motivation for choosing degree			23.954			
(Admission mark reference)						
Professional expectations (1)	↓.046	.133	.118	.955	.736	1.239
Interest in content of degree (2)	.072	.131	.299	1.074	.831	1.388
Others/ NS-NC (3)	↓.325	.157	4.311	.722*	.532	.982
Type of secondary school			17.093			
(State reference)						
Private (1)	.120	.049	6.088	1.127*	1.025	1.240
State-funded private (2)	.168	.043	15.201	1.183***	1.087	1.287
Age	.018	.004	18.084	1.018***	1.010	1.026
Admission mark	.025	.009	7.632	1.025**	1.007	1.044
Constant	↓3.272	.219	223.491	.038*		

Notes: Wald statistic follows a Chi-square distribution with 1 degree of freedom.

Exp (B) o OR = Odds Ratio ***: $p < 0.001$; **: $p < 0.01$; *: $p < 0.05$.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the University Pre-enrolment Register of Catalonia, 2016 microdata . University Admissions Office (OAU). Inter-University Council of Catalonia (CIC).

Table 4. Results of the global goodness of fit measures.

Global measures of goodness	Statistic	Degrees of freedom	P-value
Chi square of the model	343.018	30	↓.000
↓2 log of the verisimilitude	26136.486		
Hosmer and Lemeshow test	7.712	8	↓.462
Cox and Snell R-squared	.007		
Nagelkerke R-squared	.017		

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the University Pre-enrolment Register of Catalonia, 2016 microdata. University Admissions Office (OAU). Inter-University Council of Catalonia (CIC).

Regarding age, it must be noted that students who transfer do so after a year of studying the first degree and, therefore, generally a year later. Furthermore, their average age is lower than that of students who do not transfer because older students (who are admitted to university as mature students aged between 25 and 45 years) are not included in the profile of those who transfer.

The results of the explanatory model also validate the second hypothesis concerning the effects of academic type variables. They show how the probability of transfer increases among students assigned their first preference (1.351) with significantly higher university admission marks, indicating that the admission mark was not an obstacle in their first university admission and thus a reason for subsequent transfer.

Last, the analysis of the effects of the motivations for choosing these degrees shows that this variable does not increase the probability of transfer. Therefore, in this case the third hypothesis is rejected. It must be considered that this variable informs us of the reasons for choosing the degree transferred to, so as expected it reveals the same type of reasons expressed by students who do not drop out, related to the content of the degree. Knowing the reasons why they chose the first degree would have been opportune, but the data used to not provide this variable.

As a final evaluation of the model, Table 5 classifies the observed values versus those predicted by the MLR for the university students who transfer. Observation of the table shows how the total percentage of students classified correctly is 62.2%, with a model sensitivity of 49.3% and a specificity of 63.4%.

Conclusions and discussion

The results obtained based on the microdata from the University Pre-enrolment Register of Catalonia enable us to further the theoretical and empirical discussion of the (re) conceptualisation of dropout divided into its different operative types. Our interest was specifically university transfer. The empirical evidence provided by the analyses carried out, which distinguished between the two concepts and therefore between the different trajectories and situations, enabled us to see the factors that explain the trajectories of the students in operation both before being admitted to university, and once admitted.

Although there is a very limited number of studies that focus on university transfer in the European context, the results obtained in the empirical work intervene in the difference between the factors that characterise university transfer and dropout. Transfer is a phenomenon that occurs mainly in the first year of the degree and runs counter to the arguments that limit the explanations for dropout to poor academic performance, the level of demand of the degree and the low quality of the degrees.

To this effect, and in line with the findings of the European studies, the general profile of the student who transfers is from a family with a high socio-professional status (director, liberal and professional) and has a high level of access to and use of communication and information technologies. Previous experience and their parents’ socialisation in the university system increases openness to the possibility of their offspring transferring.

Table 5. Classification table of observed values versus predicted values.

		Predicted		
		Transfer		Percentage correct
Observed		No	Yes	
Transfer	No	26601	15356	
	Yes	1956	1903	
Global percentage				

Note: Cut-off value 0.090
Source: Author’s own elaboration based on the University Pre-enrolment Register of Catalonia, 2016 microdata . University Admissions Office (OAU). Inter-University Council of Catalonia (CIC).

In line with Villar (2010), the results also show how students who are either independent of the family or whose parents are not working – and who are therefore more likely to be reconciling studying and paid work – are less likely to transfer. Two possible explanations could underpin this phenomenon: the economic cost of extending their university studies for students already inserted into the labour market, and greater maturity and conviction when choosing the degree.

The statistical model also confirms a factor specific to the Spanish university admission system: the significant effect of the territory of residence. University transfer meets the needs of a group of students who, after a year studying a degree at a university closer to the family residence, decide to change the autonomous community in which they reside to study a degree that better suits their interests. What in the first year of a degree is seen as a high cost (be it economic, family pressure, or the personal cost of a change of residence) is later paid by some students in transfer.

The last two characteristics agree with the findings of Hovdhaugen (2009, 2011), who concluded that both parental education level and the place of residence are predictive variables of university transfer.

Last, the factors related to previous academic performance and the level of demand of the degree put forward in the studies that address dropout without any differentiation between type, were shown to have the opposite effect on this phenomenon. The empirical evidence showed that students who transfer do so in the first years of their degree and that their previous academic performance is better than that of the rest of students. Moreover, the importance of 'careers counselling' and 'guidance' on the content of the degree being studied were shown to be important. These factors do not impact on university dropout but they do decrease the likelihood transfer.

Given these observations, it is essential to identify the factors associated with the decision to continue on the same degree course or to dropout or transfer to be able to adapt the actions and strategies implemented at the different institutional levels. This would enable going beyond accepting the descriptive variables to be able to explain the phenomenon of a large number of students deciding to drop out of university.

The empirical findings have implications for academic and university policy as the reasons for dropout and its academic and economic consequences are fundamentally different depending on whether it is a matter of dropping out of the university system definitively, or if it is a question of transfer. Not only does this have implications in economic terms, of the efficient use of resources, and essentially of funding and the cost in terms of the prestige of the different establishments, but it also has important social implications which must be considered.

To this effect, and in line with Tinto (2012), the institutional actions that seek to improve students' social and academic integration as a way of dealing with definitive dropout, and that focus especially on students from households with less resources and cultural capital, are not addressing the phenomenon of transfer.

On the other hand, actions that intervene in the dimensions related to 'vocational' questions involved with aspects could make choosing a degree and a professional career difficult, such as a lack of adequate information when taking this important decision, would be more in line with students who transfer. These include maintaining information networks with secondary schools, providing pre-university and first-year degree students with information related to education and careers counselling, reviewing the academic regulations to facilitate changing degrees through credit transfer and acquired skills, promoting tutorage and mentoring actions between parents and student advisory units, among others.

Notes

1. According to the Integrated University Information System (SIU), the *dropout rate* is defined as the *percentual relationship between the students in a new intake cohort C enrolled on a degree T in the academic year x who have not enrolled on that degree in academic years x+1 and x+2, and the total number of students in the new*

intake cohort C that enrolled on the degree in the academic year X. This expresses the degree of non-continuity of students on the educational programme (RD1393/2007).

2. University Admissions Office. Inter-University Council of Catalonia.
3. The database contains individual information on the sociodemographic and academic variables, and the university pre-enrolment process (a total of 107 variables) of the university students admitted to Catalan public universities.
4. The highest educational and occupational level of the parents was used.
5. The admission mark (minimum 5 and maximum 14) for bachelor's degrees incorporates the two best marks in the specific examinations phase, weighted by the corresponding coefficient (0.1 or 0.2). These subjects must be linked to the area of knowledge to which the degree they want to study belongs.
6. The logistic coefficients are expressed in terms of the odds ratio of an event occurring (change of degree due to transfer), defined as the odds ratio of an event occurring or not occurring. To this effect, odds ratios higher than 1 increase the probability of transfer, while odds ratios lower than 1 lower the probability.

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