# University Stakeholders' Perceptions of Student Attrition in two Moroccan Universities: A Qualitative Study

The ongoing reforms to improve student retention in Moroccan higher education have been in place for over twenty years. However, student attrition remains a significant problem. This article aims to provide a comprehensive exploration and understanding of the perspectives of a selected group of university stakeholders on student attrition in open admissions institutions in two Moroccan universities, specifically the humanities, science, and social sciences faculties. A year-long qualitative study was conducted, drawing upon existing literature on attrition and retention as well as the reforms in Moroccan higher education. The final sample size comprised one hundred seventeen participants, representing various university stakeholders. The thematic analysis highlighted four main themes contributing to university attrition: students' pre-university factors, academic experience, social experience, and external factors.

*Keywords:* Moroccan higher education, university dropout, LMD reform, attrition.

## Introduction

The Moroccan higher education system has evolved gradually since independence. It now includes public universities, non-university institutions for executive training, private universities, private-public partnerships universities, private non-university institutions, and public and private post-baccalaureate vocational training institutions. Public university education is the most dominant, with 88% of students enrolled in open admissions institutions, and 12% in limited admissions institutions. The latter select candidates upon entry and boast high retention rates. Non-selective open admissions institutions (henceforth OAIs), such as the faculties of humanities, science, and social sciences, are accessible to all baccalaureate degree holders leading to mass enrollment and high dropout rates (INE, 2018; 2019).

Despite the many reforms implemented in the past three decades to enhance retention rates in university OAIs, these institutions still grapple with student attrition. A significant proportion of students (64%) leave the system without obtaining a diploma. Dropouts occur at different levels, with 25.2% leaving during the first year, 40.2% after two years, and 20.9% after three years. The number of students who do not graduate after six years is highest in the faculties of social sciences (68%), followed by the faculties of science and humanities (Cours des Comptes, 2018; INE, 2019; Kouhlani & Ennaji, 2012; Mansouri, 2023; Mansouri & Moumine, 2017).

The attrition issue in Moroccan higher education required numerous reforms that questioned the university's core mission, organization, quality, and performance. In 2003, a significant pedagogical reform was undertaken based on Law 01-00 (Law 01-00), which formed the fundamental framework of the higher

education reform initiated by the National Charter for Education and Training in 1999 (NCET, 1999). Moroccan universities have adopted the Bologna process to enhance their quality and international recognition by implementing the *Licence-Master-Doctorat* (LMD) system, which aims to harmonize the higher education of participating countries, improve the quality of teaching and learning, facilitate mobility, and ensure the recognition of diplomas and time to degree (INE, 2014).

In 2008, the Higher Council for Education published a report that brought to light the flaws in the Moroccan education system. As a result, an Emergency Plan for Education Reform (2009 -2012) was introduced to tackle issues such as quality, equity, and university dropout rates. However, this plan only addressed the organizational aspects of the LMD system and focused on specific areas such as language and communication concerns, orientation and tutoring policies, professionalization of university education, and amendments to the *Cahier des Normes Pédagogiques Nationales* related to the *licence* cycle in the open admissions system (INE, 2014).

The LMD system has been successful in other countries but its implementation in Morocco has resulted in significant dysfunctions. The university adopted its modular and biannual pedagogical structure without incorporating the credit mechanism, which is essential to the Bologna process. This omission has hindered student mobility nationally and internationally, thereby undermining the attractiveness of Moroccan universities. In addition to the student-to-professor ratio, course organization, and evaluation that have not met the requirements of the LMD reform, the lack of financial autonomy has impeded the university's ability to adapt and establish partnerships with the socio-economic world and organizations (Mansouri, 2023).

The Higher Council for Education introduced the Strategic Vision 2015-2030 (INE, 2015) in 2015. Its goal is to create a more equitable, high-quality, and inclusive school system in Morocco. The ultimate objective is to significantly improve the quality of education in a sustainable manner. It outlines key measures for the overall reform of the Moroccan education system, including expanding preschool education, revising languages used for instruction, diversifying course and career paths, promoting higher education and scientific research, and enhancing vocational training (INE, 2015).

With the introduction of Framework Law 51-17 in 2019, the Moroccan higher education system underwent a significant change. The law represents a new vision for education reform that aims to ensure student success and long-term sustainability, regardless of economic and political changes. The objective is to overhaul the Moroccan education system by implementing the principles, goals, and functions outlined in the National Charter for Education and the Strategic Vision. The law covers several aspects of the system, including structure, accessibility, curricula, programs, training, human resources, governance, provision of free education, financing, and evaluation (Law 51-17).

Nevertheless, after seventeen years of implementing the LMD system and conducting reforms to improve student retention, university attrition continued to rise in the open admissions institutions with the highest dropout rates registered in the faculties of humanities, science, and social sciences. This led the previous

government (2018-2021) to propose a Bachelor's reform as an alternative. However, the current government, in office since 2021, dismissed this reform and the Framework Law. Instead, a new reform called "PACTE ESRI, 2030" was introduced this year and it is still in the early stages (Mansouri, 2023)

Based on the above, the purpose of this article is to qualitatively explore and understand the factors contributing to student attrition in open admissions institutions, specifically the humanities, science, and social science faculties, in light of recurrent reforms and increasing attrition rates at the university.

## Literature Review

Research on student attrition in higher education dates back to the 1930s. Initially, the term "student mortality" (McNeely, 1937) was used to describe students' lack of persistence until graduation. However, this definition was criticized due to it lack of empirical evidence and disregard for students' individual characteristics. Despite these criticisms, it provided a foundation for subsequent research on attrition in higher education (Mayhew et al., 2016). In the 1980s, university attrition was defined as the act of ceasing enrollment in a higher education institution before degree completion (Bean, 1980) and as the decrease in student numbers resulting from inadequate retention (Hagedorn, 2012). This issue has sparked substantial debate in global higher education due to its impact on a country's human capital and its ability to meet the challenges of a global economy (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2004). The significance of attrition led to the establishment of student retention as a specialized field within higher education (Braxton et al., 2014; Hossler, 1984).

Since the 1980s, attrition has been investigated from diverse theoretical perspectives to understand the factors behind students' withdrawal from university, predict the characteristics of those who are more likely to leave, and establish policies able to enhance student retention in education. Social integration theories propose examining the influence of social factors, like a student's social status and previous education, on their choice to drop out of university. Psychologically oriented theories focus on the correlation between students' personality traits and attrition. They explore how well-being and ability to adjust can affect a student's decision to withdraw from university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Economic-oriented theories analyze university attrition from a cost-benefit perspective, assessing factors influencing student departure. Organizational-oriented theories analyze how institutional organization affects student attrition by examining policies and practices. Interactional theories investigate how the interaction between student traits and the academic and social environment provided by the institution impacts the student's decision to leave (Bean, 2001; Berger et al., 2012; Braxton & Lee, 2005; Braxton et al., 2014; Kuh & Love, 2000; Mayhew, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Seidman, 2012; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory suggests that university dropouts should be analyzed from the perspectives of academic and social integration, as well as

their commitment to the community and institution. Academic integration refers to the students' satisfaction with the academic experience, while social integration refers to student's satisfaction with their relationships with peers, professors, and administrators. Commitment involves the students' choice of an institution, dedication to completing their studies and obtaining a desired degree. Thus, students' level of persistence is influenced by their perception of the institution and their engagement in the university community, which should provide a supportive environment to fulfill their needs and interests.

Bean (1981) further adds that student attrition is affected by external and internal factors. The external factors encompass the approval of the chosen academic institution by the family, the perception of the institution's quality by friends, the student's financial resources, and the ability to change institutions. These external factors affect internal factors related to the institution, such as students' attendance, grades, sense of belonging, integration, satisfaction, desire to graduate from the same institution, as well as job opportunities associated with the institution (Bean, 1980; 1981; Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Although not exclusively, this qualitative study is undergirded by Vincent Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory of student departure and Bean's (1981) model of theoretical attrition. Tinto's (1993) theory offers a framework for assessing the impact of internal factors related to the institution of enrollment on student attrition behavior, while Bean's theory provides a framework for assessing the impact of external factors on student attrition behavior.

## Methodology and Methods

This study was designed as a qualitative interview study (Creswell, 2014). It aimed to explore and understand the factors contributing to student attrition in the faculties of humanities, science, and social sciences in two universities: Hassan II University of Casablanca (H2UC) and Cadi Ayad University-Marrakech (CAU). Both universities are located in densely populated regions known for their cultural diversity and economic influence.To achieve its purpose, the following questions guided the study:

*Central question*: What were the perceptions of a selected sample of university stakeholders about the factors influencing student attrition at the H2UC and CAU's faculties of humanities, science, and social sciences?

*Sub-questions:*

- What academic factors emerged in the university stakeholders' accounts of student attrition in these faculties?
- What social factors emerged in the university stakeholders' accounts of attrition in these faculties?
- What other factors emerged in the university stakeholders' accounts of student attrition in these faculties?

Purposive and snowball sampling until data saturation were utilized to recruit participants for this qualitative study (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Guest et al., 2012; Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Miles et al., 2014; Morse et al., 2016). Over a one-year period (2021-2022), the sample consisted of 117 male and female participants from various regions, all of whom possessed knowledge of the faculties under study. The sample included students, professors, academic advisors, higher education officials, administrators, employers, and parents.

Data was collected through in-depth one-on-one and focus group recorded interviews (Birks and Mills; 2011; Hatch, 2002; Finch et al., 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Thematic research questions and interview questions were formulated for each stakeholder group, following the recommendations of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). The interview guides were refined to match the changing inquiries and the growing population obtained through snowball sampling from previous interviews. The data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis method. It was transcribed verbatim, and then Charmaz's (2014) coding methods and Saldaña's (2016) coding typology were used to generate codes manually. CAQDAS (NVivo) was finally used to enhance the analysis process (Zamawe, 2015).

## Results and Discussion

Applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) "keyness" and "prevalence" principles, the analysis revealed four main themes, along with subthemes: Students' pre-university factors, academic experience, social experience, and exogenous factors.

## Theme One: Students' Pre-University Factors

The qualitative study found that certain pre-enrollment characteristics within the humanities, science, and social sciences faculties were significant factors that contributed to the high attrition rates in these institutions. These characteristics include involuntary enrollment at the faculty, lack of clear career goals, lack of academic advising, and the reputation of the faculty[1].

### Involuntary Enrollment at the Faculty

One of the primary reasons cited by the participants for the issue of attrition was the practice of students' enrolment in the faculties of humanities, science, and social sciences as a last resort without proper information or consideration. This approach resulted in students feeling forced to attend and eventually dropping out. As one student stated, "I never intended to be here, but I had no other choice" (ST[2]6). Faculty administrators expressed concern for students frustrated by limited

[1] Institution (not professors)
[2]Student

admissions generally regarded as prestigious institutions: "We know them, they're full of frustration" (FA[3]4). Many of the parents interviewed stated that they enrolled their children in the faculty due to their perception of their child's failure to achieve satisfactory results or gain admission to prestigious university programs that they deemed more valuable: "She was compelled to register at the faculty due to her poor grades" *(PA[4]8).*

**Lack of Career Goal**

In addition to the challenges of accessing higher education, a lack of clear career goals, as uncovered in interviews with participants, frequently resulted in students selecting a college or major in a haphazard manner. This decision-making process is often influenced by arbitrary factors, like proximity to the institution or other conveniences: "That was the nearest faculty to where I live. I don't like commuting by bus" (ST6). According to some faculty administrators, the absence of a career goal resulted in students enrolling in majors that did not align with their high school studies and previous aspirations: "Many students with a scientific baccalaureate degree end up in the humanities" (FA[5]3).

**Lack of Academic Advising**

All the participants focused on academic advising as a leading cause of high school graduates making careless and sometimes risky choices in higher education. Faculty administrators and officials primarily attributed students' default access to the faculty to poor academic advising: "Academic advising has a significantly negative impact on the majority of students" (FO[6]1). High school graduates are not aware of the majors available at the faculty or the potential career opportunities associated with them: "Students have no idea the studies offered here or the job prospects" (FO4). In interviews conducted with various employers, a common concern expressed was that baccalaureate graduates were not sufficiently prepared or supported to make informed decisions about their future careers. Many employers voiced disappointment that the faculty was often seen as the only option for graduates, without any consideration of their career goals or aspirations:

> "We simply send them from home to school, and once they obtain their baccalaureate degree, we send them to the faculty" (EM[7]5).

In a similar vein, parents who were interviewed expressed their disappointment that their children never received adequate academic advising or counseling support. According to them, 'misadvising' was a key reason for students' failure at the university level: "How can they succeed without proper

[3]Faculty administrator
[4]Parent
[5]Faculty administrator
[6]Faculty official
[7]Employer

advising services?" (PA[8]5). Discussions with school academic advisors revealed their dissatisfaction with the challenges they face in their profession. They often complained about the unfavorable conditions and expressed frustration at not being able to perform their job as desired: "Unfortunately, our job is riddled with difficulties, it's a 'do-it-yourself' situation, it's chaotic. It's pointless to even discuss the COVID phase" (AA[9]6).

Social groups were criticized for their role in the decision-making process for post-secondary education: "It's the parent, the cousin, the neighbor, all become advisors" (ST6). Participants expressed disapproval of others' intervention in students' choices, believing that directing these students without considering their abilities and aspirations diminishes the role of academic advising and leads to increased dropout rates. Some professors went further to state that, "People don't realize how they undermine the faculty's image in the high schoolers' minds" (PA12).

### Reputation of the Humanities, Science, and Social Sciences Faculties

Data analysis revealed that the faculty's declining reputation was negatively affecting student motivation. Students' views were particularly noteworthy: "My high school was close to the faculty, and the teacher used to say, 'if you're not good enough, you'll end up there'. It was haunting me, and I saw dark whenever I passed by" (ST1). Most of the faculty officials interviewed confirmed the influence of the widespread social perceptions on students' mental state and feeling of failure when they are faced with the only alternative of joining the faculty: "They feel desperate here." (FA4). Many parents felt that their children were failing their studies due to the negative image portrayed by certain faculties. This perception further worsened the situation, leading to comments such as, "I always told my son that going to this faculty would be the worst thing ever in his life" (PA3). Humanities faculties were especially looked down upon, with remarks like, "I hate to say it, but humanities faculties are the trash of education," (EM20).

While parents and students' perceptions were generally hostile toward the faculty, the image of degrees awarded by these same institutions was more mixed. Some parents expressed a skeptical attitude, describing faculty degrees as not valued by employers: "I don't trust these degrees"(PA6). However, in disadvantaged social communities, these degrees were highly valued and respected. The status of degrees conferred by public universities was often linked to their endorsement by the State: "My *Licence* degree is very important to my parents; it's a state-recognized degree." (ST3).

## Theme Two: Academic Experience

The study participants noted that students' academic performance, language barrier, attitudes and behavior, professors' commitment, lack of autonomy,

[8]Parent
[9]Academic advisor

curricula, the LMD system, the low-professor-to student ratio, and pedagogical equipment were key factors in their decision to dropout of higher education. These issues were found to be linked to their prior schooling experiences, which could have an adverse effect on their motivation and persistence.

**Students' Academic Performance**

All participants agreed that the primary reason for student attrition was the students' previous education system. Professors consistently criticized the low academic achievements of students in higher education and expressed concern about a consistent and increasingly alarming decrease in the academic abilities of incoming students: "They're bad in all disciplines and it got worse after the pandemic"(PR3). Some professors viewed students' departure as a consequence of gaps accumulated during early childhood and elementary education: "We're reaping the results of the failing elementary and secondary system" (PR5). The devaluation of the baccalaureate degree as the sole requirement for joining the faculty was also widely discussed during the interviews, particularly among academic advisors and higher education officials: "The baccalaureate grades hold no value; they don't represent the students' actual level, especially after the pandemic" (FO11).

**Language Barrier**

All participants unanimously agreed that the use of French language as the primary language of instruction in higher studies is a major hindrance to students' persistence: "Overnight, students are placed in a system that uses a foreign language, which is nothing less than a crime*" (PR5)*. The French language was frequently identified as the main, if not the sole, reason for failure and dropout at the faculty: "Students have a solid scientific background, but they fail to understand French" (PR17). Several participants noted that the overcrowding in certain majors offered in Arabic is due to the students' lack of proficiency in French: "Students leave biology studies at the Faculty of Science and pursue geography in Arabic in humanities" (FA11).

**Attitudes and Behavior**

It appears that the poor academic performance and high dropout rates among students at the faculty are due to their personal characteristics. Most of the participants highlighted the students' lack of maturity, autonomy, nonchalant attitude, and frequent absenteeism. Professors attributed the lack of autonomy to learning conditions and prior education systems, which generally do not encourage students' independence: "Even after completing their baccalaureate, they are still not capable of managing themselves" (PR2). The employers interviewed seemed to prefer graduates from private schools because of their distinct attitude, behavior, and communication skills as compared to graduates from the faculty: "We can

easily observe the difference in attitude, behavior, and communication. Candidates from the faculty lack all those soft skills" (EM8).

The students were well aware of the importance of being adequately prepared during their secondary education in order to be self-sufficient and successful when they entered university. They believed that their lack of preparedness put them at a disadvantage in a faculty system that they perceived as disorganized, relaxed, and unconcerned about rules and regulations: "There is no expectation for class attendance, no supervision, it's chaotic" (ST9). The lack of authority within the faculty was frequently criticized, which may explain the deviant behaviors that some students reported, including drug use within the institution: "It's not surprising to see students smoking joints of marijuana" (ST10). However, it was notable that most students attributed their disengagement to professors. They believed that their pedagogies were not conducive to learning and concentration, often leading to boredom and a desire to leave the faculty: "We get so bored that if we're not patient, we end up skipping all the classes" (ST14).

**Professors' Commitment**

Discussions about the role of professors in the university system have brought attention to the viewpoints of stakeholders regarding their accountability for the success or failure of education in the faculty. Students, in particular, believed that professors bear significant responsibility for attrition at the faculty: "Professors have a powerful impact on whether we choose to stay or leave a course*" (ES9)*. One of the main complaints about professors is their perceived lack of motivation and engagement in their job, which was highlighted in interviews with most participants. Faculty administrators feel that professors are not committed enough and do not take their responsibilities seriously: "We don't sense their passion, dedication, and enthusiasm" (PA2). Higher education officials repeatedly emphasized the need for professors to be more actively involved with students. They often pointed out the absence of connection with students, and asserted that the conventional dynamic between professors and learners, which has persisted for many years, is now obsolete and inadequate: "Professors must make an effort and connect with students" (HEO11).

Many faculty administrators believed that inadequate language proficiency and pedagogical competence among professors hindered teaching, which is essential for students' intellectual development and persistence at the faculty. Some administrators specifically mentioned the lack of expertise among newly hired professors, citing their origin from a failing system: " They're young and don't possess the academic and pedagogical expertise required for this profession" (FA5). In addition, higher education officials reported that professors were resistant to change even during the Covid-19 crisis: "The University provided all the technical support for professors to put courses online, but they didn't fully participate" (HEO2).

Some professors interviewed confirmed the occasional negligent attitude towards digitization and their casual behavior in the context of distance learning: *"*It's a bit of DIY with the resources we have at home." (PR3). The variety of tools

professors claimed to have used during the Covid 19 lockdown shows a lack of coordination and raises questions about the disorder characterizing the experience: "I used Google Meet, Zoom, or Teams, not really to teach online, but just to share my materials and show I was present for students" (PR2). All students interviewed reported a lack of support from the professors during the pandemic and expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with their distance learning: "Some professors sent lessons and videos without any explanations or instructions. Others displayed slides and PDFs without any follow-up and without caring about our comprehension" (ST7).

**Curricula**

Factors contributing to student attrition at the faculty included concerns about the curricula. Students stressed the need for relevant curricula to enhance their intellectual development: "Contents are outdated and useless for our intellectual growth" (ST13). Employers expressed concerns about the relevance of faculty degrees in the job market. Particularly, they pointed out the issue of education-job mismatch for graduates in humanities and social sciences, whose education does not align with the country's economic transitions. All of them emphasized the importance of training students in fields and skills that meet Morocco's economic development: "They must stop issuing degrees in majors that we don't need anymore" (EM3).

**The LMD System**

Following the adoption of the LMD system, the reorganization of studies was unanimously identified by participants as a major source of tension and stress. They believed that it had contributed to students' withdrawal and failure. Most students interviewed admitted to struggling with the modular system, finding it too complex to understand: "I couldn't cope with it" (ST2). In particular, the issue with the course evaluation in this system was found to be more significant than initially thought. All the participants noted that the testing phase would extend over an extended period, resulting in a negative impact on class time and students' learning.

Professors further asserted that the Bologna pedagogic system was not appropriate for the mass education typical of the humanities and social sciences faculties in Morocco: "We can't conduct a continuous assessment with 700 students. So, we skip the core of the system" (PR17). Most faculty administrators acknowledged conducting one final exam: "With just that, we've turned into testing machines" (FA5). Many faculty officials were not surprised to see most dropouts happening due to this system: "Students who have subjects pending from the previous year often become overwhelmed and drop out during their second year" (FO1).

**Low Professor-to-Student Ratio**

All participants acknowledged the significant impact of low professor-to-student ratio on student success at the faculty: "Sometimes, professors graciously teach subjects unrelated to their specialty to support the program" (FA10). Interviewed students emphasized that overcrowded amphitheaters were detrimental to the quality of learning at the faculty: "With hundreds of students, it's impossible to hear the professor" (ST4). Most faculty officials confirmed that the low professor-to-student ratio was due to the high rates of enrollments*:* "We know it harms our quality, but we have no choice" (FO9). However, the congestion caused by high enrollment was less concerning than it initially seemed due to the high rate of student absenteeism. Instead of considering student absenteeism a weakness, some faculty officials considered it an advantage in managing class overcrowding: "We know they don't show up all of them, and we end up with properly furnished amphitheaters with seats still empty at the back" (FO2).

All of the interviewed professors blamed the administration for ignoring available human resources and infrastructure in its enrollment policy, which resulted in the massification phenomenon at the faculty: "The admin is responsible for this anarchy" (PR1). Most faculty officials agreed that the administration lacks the necessary tools to evaluate and take action as they lack statistics and dashboards: "It's beyond us and there's nothing we can do about it" (FO7).

**Pedagogical Equipment**

Insufficient resources and inadequate equipment were found to be impeding the achievement of educational reform objectives aimed at improving the quality of higher education. Numerous professors voiced their dissatisfaction with the declining infrastructure, which had a detrimental effect on the quality of their work and the motivation of their students, leading to high dropout rates in these faculties:"We manage the crisis every single day"(PR6). All interviewed students shared the same opinion, criticizing the condition of the facilities and the outdated, poorly maintained educational equipment, which likely contributed to their frustration and lack of motivation: "The equipment I had in high school was much better than what the faculty had" (ES17).

## Theme Three: Social Experience

In addition to academic challenges, all participants expressed concerns regarding the social experience of students at the faculty. Students' transition to higher education, student-administration relationship, student-peer relationship, student-professor relationships, and extra-and curricular activities were found to be linked to students' social integration and potential impact on attrition at the faculty.

## Students' Transition to Higher Education

The transition from high school to university triggered significant discussions and was identified as a rupture, causing tensions. The interviewed students showed strong emotions towards the faculty, which were quite unsettling: "This huge place is shocking" (ST13). Some went on to state further that: "I was scared of the faculty in the first semester" (ST19). The phase of separating from family was especially challenging for students, as they had to adapt to a new environment, deal with new rules, and learn to be autonomous: "I'm not home and it's causing me a lot of anxiety" (ST19). Generally, the quality of relationships between freshmen and others in the faculty environment was a significant topic of discussion regarding its impact on their adaptation and social integration within the institution and consequently, on their overall university experience. Students widely discussed their interactions with administrators, peers, and professors.

## Student-Administration Relationship

The study revealed a consensus on the crucial role of administration in student retention at the faculty, with most participants attributing student attrition to administrative issues: "The admin is the heart of the faculty" (ST2). The lack of effective management received widespread criticism from students: "I feel like the admin doesn't exist in this faculty" (ST2). In some faculties, students extensively discussed the challenges they faced when dealing with the administration and specifically criticized its closed-off nature: "It's an admin that doesn't listen to us, it's always closed. It's not accessible" (ST4). The administrative system was deemed outdated, and the staff interacting with the students were unwelcoming and inattentive: "The front office person ruins everything, from day 1!" (ST1).

Due to their many complaints, students often had negative opinions of public servants' behavior: "We put a bunch of losers in charge of students who're just starting their career" (ST4). Some higher education officials interviewed seemed to be aware of the tense and sometimes confrontational relationships between students and the administrative staff. In particular, the issue of an aging population was brought up: "Most of the staff are about to retire. We've implemented some I.T to minimize direct contact with students and reduce tensions" (FO1). However, due to the lack of qualified administrative staff and a clear definition of their roles at the faculty, students often received administrative advice from any willing individual. This situation has led to a decline in the faculty's reputation, as expressed by many students: "Sometimes, our groundskeepers advise us on admin issues. It's a shame" (ES13).

## Student-Peer Relationship

Data collected on students' social life at the faculty highlighted the difficulty of building a social network and the crucial need for social integration. The massification phenomenon at the faculty and the students' characteristics were found to hinder the development of social connections among students: "It's

difficult to make friends. In this large ‘factory’, you rarely meet the same student twice" (ST17). The sense of isolation experienced by students was identified as a source of intense anxiety and dissatisfaction, prompting some to leave the faculty: " I was tired of being alone and lonely"(ST3). Confronted with a new environment with unfamiliar norms, students seek support from their peers: "Hopefully, my old high school friends were of a great help" (ES15).

Comparing students' comments before and after Covid 19 health crisis revealed a shift in their view of the faculty as a social space. While they often complained about the challenges of fitting in at the faculty, losing social connections during lockdown made them see the faculty as a valuable place to establish and nurture relationships. Most students interviewed regretted the lack of social interaction with their peers and professors: "I missed atmosphere a lot" (ST7). Other students claimed that sociability and social connections, even minimal at the faculty, were essential for their personal growth and well-being: "I was looking forward to returning to the faculty. This is where students grow and develop, not on their own at home" (ST14).

**Student-Professor Relationships**

Many professors claimed to empathize with their students and encouraged open communication. However, upon reviewing the comments from both professors and students, it was evident that professors rarely demonstrated these attitudes. Meetings outside of class were infrequent. Students often described the quality of their relationships with professors, revealing their dissatisfaction and need for more support and connection: "It’s impossible to approach a professor at the faculty. They’re never available" (ST4).

Most professors interviewed confirmed students’ perceptions of distant out-of-class relationships, which were generally the norm: "I have no contact with students outside my class" (PR18). If it ever happened, personal issues were seldom raised and interactions were viewed as strictly professional, focusing on course content, career planning, and job search. Professors interviewed attributed their reserved behavior to the traditional culture of respecting elders in Moroccan society and the power dynamics favoring those who grade exams: "There’s a relationship of authority established between us"(PR9). They further expressed opposition to non-professional relationships and admitted to avoiding personal topics with students. The fear of becoming too familiar was evident during exchanges with the professors: ″When we open up to them, they tend to exaggerate" (PR4).

**Extra-Curricular Activities**

During the interviews, the lack of extra-curricular activities and dedicated space for student meetings to enhance social bonds among students was a major topic of discussion. Many students voiced their dissatisfaction with their social life at the faculty: "We never had a conference or anything that I can remember. This faculty was dead!" (ST15). The lack of events outside of class time was often

identified as the primary reason for the decline in student presence at the faculty: " We finish class and vanish. There's no theater, no music, only a few sports activities, usually done by a few boys" (ST9). It was interesting to observe that extracurricular activities extend beyond just creating a positive environment for students. They promote social integration and a sense of belonging to the institution: "We don't feel we belong in here" (ST6).

However, some students recognized the existence of a sports infrastructure at their faculty, but criticized it as basic, emphasizing the lack of supervision and organization of sports activities: "It's not up to the standards of a university. There's no coach, no program, no schedule. Students are left to their own devices" (ST2). Faculty administrators interviewed echoed these sentiments, regretting the lack of extra-curricular activity meeting points that could enhance students' sociability and their sense of belonging at the faculty: "All that's cultural, sports, etc., it's below expectations" (FA3).

Some interviewed parents expressed worry about the perceived absence of appealing opportunities from the faculty in this field. They felt that engaging in extracurricular activities could serve as a source of motivation, assist students in overcoming anxiety, enhance their academic experience, and make their student life more fulfilling: "If students attended one or two plays a week, they would reduce their stress and love the faculty" (PA5). Finally, some employers lamented the absence of extracurricular activities in public institutions, while applauding the emphasis that private institutions place on them to enhance student integration and nurture their sense of personal fulfillment: "Private schools offer pedagogically meaningful activities. They cultivate well-stocked heads rather than well stuffed heads" (EM6).

## Theme Four: Exogenous Factors

The findings of this qualitative study revealed that academic and social factors, which appeared to be mutually reinforcing, played a crucial role in the success of students in their academic pursuits. However, certain external factors also had a significant impact on the students' academic persistence and could potentially lead to student attrition at the university. These include economic and social factors.

### Economic Factors

Discussions with various participants frequently emphasized the economic impact on students' studies. Underprivileged students were more vulnerable and at higher risk of failing and dropping out of university. Their challenging living conditions did not support their concentration or success: "Students end up in professional centers because, after three years at the faculty, they are still a financial burden on their parents" (EM14). Most faculty officials interviewed attested to the causal relationship between university dropout and poverty. Students from low-income families would be more likely to drop out of the

university because, among other reasons, they need to work to finance their education: "Some students must work to support both their parents and themselves" (FO11). However, the struggle to find work outside of class hours led some students to take on full-time jobs, ultimately affecting their ability to attend classes and increasing their risk of dropping out: "I was tired of missing classes; I was tired of catching up. I was tired of working and studying, so I chose a salary" (ST14).

Many students interviewed regretted not receiving any financial aid from the State and often questioned the criteria for awarding grants, feeling that they were unfairly overlooked compared to their peers whom they perceived as less needy: "We don't have equal opportunities, especially those in dire need of grants" (ST11). Some students further mentioned instances of collective violence, seemingly reflecting student discontent and grievances: "When we don't receive our grants on time, our faculty becomes akin to Gaza" (ST9). Equally, many students focused on the limited housing options on campus, which caused significant instability in their lives: "We're constantly moving in and out. It's either too small, too noisy, no convenient restroom, no kitchen, etc.," (ST8). Because housing opportunities were cheaper on the outskirts of towns, students often struggled with transportation issues: "I take four buses daily; it's exhausting" (ST16).

Families' financial hardships were exacerbated during the COVID-19 lockdown. The decrease in parents' income left some students more at risk as their parents encountered new challenges like job loss, greatly affecting the students' persistence at the faculty: "My father couldn't work anymore. My mother borrowed money to feed us. Honestly, studies were the least of my concerns" (ST19). Some students admitted that not having a personal computer had greatly hindered their education, leading to their dropping out of studies: "I don't see how the university assumes that everyone has a PC or a smartphone? I didn't have any, so I left the university altogether" (ST12).

Interviews with faculty officials indicated a strong awareness of the increasing economic inequalities among students as a result of the government's lockdown measures. Regional disparities were reported to exacerbate these inequalities, resulting in the marginalization of the most vulnerable students. The lack of internet access in some areas would particularly disadvantage students living there during the implementation of remote learning programs, posing a significant risk of dropout: "Students in rural areas were unable to take online classes further putting them at a disadvantage" (FO2).

**Social Factors**

The economic and social factors were interrelated. All participants agreed that students' social status and family culture had a significant impact on their university experience and were essential for understanding their dropout behavior. Professors observed that students' social challenges often stemmed from financial difficulties: "Every year, a student leaves to work in the fields, to get married, to take care of an elderly, etc.," (PR6). Some parents highlighted their cultural

influence, which can be traditional and resistant especially to their daughters' aspirations for higher education: "She'd got her *Licence* degree; she doesn't need more education" (PA13). While some students felt fortunate, others found their family responsibilities to be burdensome and difficult to balance with their studies, leading to a significant impact on their academic success: "Loads of household chores wait for me when I get home. I'm always exhausted" (ST5).

On the other hand, some participants suggested that violence might contribute to attrition at the faculty. Incidents of aggression outside of some faculties were sometimes reported: "My son was assaulted right at the door of the faculty. He was so traumatized that he refused to go back" (PA14). The sense of insecurity expressed by some students appeared to be exacerbated by the unrestricted access to the faculty's premises: "No one checks people on entry. It's wide open to strangers" (ST16), which makes it difficult to apprehend the aggressors in cases of aggressive or criminal behavior. A few female students attributed their insecurity to the radical ideologies prevailing especially in the humanities faculties: "I was threatened all the time because I don't wear a veil" (ST12).

Professors occasionally reported violent incidents stemming from student psychological issues: "A student had undiagnosed schizophrenia. Once, she ran down the hall screaming and hitting everything. We were all frightened" (PR6). On the other hand, students were unhappy with the lack of psychological support to help them cope with anxiety and stress. Although universities quickly introduced support services during the lockdown, students felt that the process for accessing these services did not meet their needs and expectations. Some students even questioned the existence of a system designed to provide psychological assistance, arguing that it was deceptive: "I sent an email, but they never responded. When you need help, timing is important" (ET13). Some students found the requirement to communicate via social media impractical and raised privacy concerns: "There was psychological support via WhatsApp. This isn't serious" (ET9).

## The Qualitative Study's Limitations and Implications

This qualitative study offered a comprehensive understanding of the factors leading to student attrition in two university's open admissions institutions, namely the humanities, science, and social sciences faculties. It provided valuable insight into attrition behavior from multiple perspectives involving university stakeholders. Nonetheless, the study had limitations and the results should be interpreted with caution:

- University attrition is a concern for society as a whole. Education stakeholders from various fields (secondary education, media, and unions, etc.) may have different perspectives from those interviewed.
- The study did not focus enough on the students who had dropped out of the system altogether, and did not address the attrition issue among non-traditional students and students with special needs.

Despite these limitations, this study may have implications for professors, policy makers, students, employers, and parents. It may also provide a foundation for further research on attrition using a mixed methods approach.

## Conclusion

Evidence from the thematic analysis above helped answer the research questions and identify the primary factors that may contribute to increased student attrition in the humanities, science, and social sciences faculties. Four main themes were identified: Students' pre-university factors, academic experience, social experience, and exogenous factors. The collected data allowed for the formulation of some recommendations likely to enhance retention in these institutions.

Since pre-university factors may affect student retention and persistence, addressing pre-entry barriers upstream could reduce student dropout in humanities, science, and social sciences faculties. Providing high school students with training in essential skills, particularly focusing on languages and soft skills, could help them become autonomous learners at the university. At this point, it may be beneficial to initiate communication campaigns aimed at changing negative perceptions about open admissions institutions. These campaigns should highlight the significance of academic advising and counseling, providing information about higher education offerings and pathways to assist students in adjusting their academic path and selecting majors aligned with their career goals.

Given that attrition is linked to students' academic experience, it may be advisable to concentrate on enhancing students' academic integration. To accomplish this, faculties could promote the use of engagement-based pedagogies, break down larger classes into smaller learning communities, implement formative assessments, and improve distance learning. The issue of language barriers, a significant factor in student dropout, could be addressed by providing refresher courses at the start of the academic year and periodically throughout to assist students in developing fundamental language and communication skills.

As students' social experience may contribute to increased attrition in the humanities, science, and social sciences faculties, promoting students' social integration in these institutions could be beneficial. To accomplish this, faculties should prioritize fostering interaction between professors and students, establishing peer mentoring, supporting extracurricular activities, hiring student life professionals, setting up student success centers, offering freshmen seminars, providing psychological support services, and creating socially inclusive living space on campus.

Because socio-economic factors may contribute to higher dropout rates among students in the humanities, science, and social sciences faculties, these institutions could benefit from promoting part-time study to help students balance their academic goal and external commitments. Establishing career centers within these faculties to offer career readiness programs and form partnerships with socioeconomic organizations for internships and job placement services could ease

students' financial burden. By updating their curricula, these faculties could meet the demands and expectations of the job market and reassure students about their professional career. Finally, offering financial aid, such as scholarship opportunities, could make higher education more accessible to a wider range of students and reduce university attrition rates.

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