



# Intentionality of early school dropout. A study on identity linkage

## *Intencionalidad de abandono escolar temprano. Un estudio sobre la vinculación de la identidad*

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### Abstract

The early school dropout rate in Spain stands at 13.6 %, a percentage higher than the European average. This is a phenomenon influenced by multifactorial aspects, including factors related to the educational system as well as individual characteristics. The objective of this research is to determine the influence of factors related to individual identity on early school dropout, such as gender, age, country of origin, mother tongue, and place of residence. The study is conducted through the administration of a specifically developed questionnaire to a sample of 1157 students from La Rioja in the final years of compulsory secondary education. Data analysis is performed through descriptive analysis, examining percentage differences between groups and represented with line graphs. The results show differences based on age, gender, and place of residence. Additionally, differences are observed between national and foreign students, especially those with a non-Spanish mother tongue. The main findings indicate that certain identity traits substantially influence whether students continue their educational process. Therefore, educational institutions should be aware of these potentially risky identity aspects in order to develop proactive actions for at-risk students, thereby avoiding future early school dropout.

**Keywords:** early school dropout, identity aspects, school dropout, school failure, truancy, compulsory secondary education.

### Resumen

La tasa de abandono escolar temprano se sitúa en España en el 13,6 %, porcentaje mayor que el de la media europea. Se trata de un fenómeno en el que influyen aspectos de carácter multifactorial, entre los que se encuentran aspectos relativos al sistema educativo, pero también a otras cuestiones propias individuo. El objetivo de esta investigación es determinar la influencia de los factores relacionados con la identidad del individuo sobre el abandono escolar temprano, como género, edad, país de origen, lengua materna y lugar de residencia. El estudio se realiza mediante la aplicación de un cuestionario desarrollado ad hoc en una muestra de 1157 alumnos y alumnas riojanos de los últimos cursos de educación secundaria obligatoria. El análisis de datos se efectúa a través de un análisis descriptivo en los que se hallan las diferencias porcentuales entre grupos y se representa con gráficos de líneas. Los resultados muestran diferencias según la edad, el género, el lugar de residencia. Además, también se aprecian diferencias entre alumnado nacional y extranjero, especialmente con lengua materna no española. Los principales hallazgos apuntan que algunos rasgos identitarios influyen sustancialmente en que cierto alumnado continúe su proceso formativo. Por ello, las instituciones educativas deben ser conocedoras de dichos aspectos identitarios potencialmente peligrosos, para poder desarrollar acciones profilácticas dirigidas al alumnado en riesgo y así evitar un futuro abandono escolar temprano.

**Palabras clave:** abandono escolar temprano, aspectos identitarios, deserción escolar, fracaso escolar, absentismo escolar, educación secundaria obligatoria.

## 1. Introduction

The Early School Dropout Rate is defined as the percentage of individuals aged 18–24 who have not completed second-stage secondary education and have not participated in any form of training in the past four weeks (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2023). Despite the fact that the reduction of this rate is one of the main objectives of structural reform programs in Europe, specifically in Spain, it remains a highly relevant educational and social problem. Thus, although there has been a slight decrease in the last year, the national rate remains above the European Union average with an overall tally of 13.6% (15.8% men and 11.3% women), compared to 11.8% in the EU (Ministerio de Educación and Formación Profesional, 2024).

The concern for this phenomenon is justified by the number of studies that warn about the serious consequences of Early School Dropout, both for the person who does not complete his formative process, and for the overall development of society. Thus, this situation seems to significantly increase the risk of lack of employability, increase job instability, decrease income and increase rates of part-time recruitment, all factors that increase the risk of poverty and social exclusion (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019). Specifically, in 2021, the employment rate of people between 20 and 64 years who had completed higher education was 84.8%, a much higher percentage than those who had only compulsory studies. Regarding physical and mental health, Gumà et al. (2019) appreciate a positive relationship between education level and healthy preventive care, in addition to better monitoring of chronic pathologies and more appropriate pharmacological use. On the contrary, people with low levels of education have reduced life expectancy, increased incidence of chronic diseases, increased consumption of toxic substances, increased incidence of eating disorders or a greater likelihood of anxiety and depression (Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2021).

The most recent studies on the phenomenon of early school leaving indicate that certain aspects of student identity exert a significant influence on this problem. Within these variables, gender has been identified as one of the most relevant factors. According to data from the National

Institute of Statistics (Spain), 16.5% of men drop out of school prematurely, compared to 11.2% of women (Ministerio de Educación and Formación Profesional, 2023). In addition, boys account for 60% of repeat students, while girls tend to score higher and pass more successfully (Cerdà et al., 2020; Ministerio de Educación and Formación Profesional, 2023). This phenomenon has aroused considerable interest among researchers in the field of educational sciences, who explore the relationships between genders and school experience, considering the differences in the construction of subjectivity between girls and boys. These differences are linked to socio-labor models and stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, which often result from differential gender socialization (Fernández-Mellizo & Martínez-García, 2017; Suberviola, 2020). In addition, a difference in attitude towards school between both genders has been observed (Sáinz et al., 2021; Salas-Rodríguez, 2022).

Another of the identitarian variables of influence in school dropout is age. Authors such as Rizo and Hernández (2019), Constante-Amores et al. (2021) and Suberviola et al. (2024) affirm that students with a lag between chronological age and the school year, who must face the decision to continue with studies after compulsory education, are at greater risk of dropping the educational system than students enrolled in the corresponding academic year. However, with respect to this variable, a biased analysis would be carried out if the characteristic “repeating students” were not taken into account, since one of the phenomena that best predicts early school dropout is the non-promotion in some school year (Cerdà et al., 2020). In this context, the Organic Law of Modification of the Organic Law of Education (LOMLOE) of 2020 highlights as one of the main challenges of our education system the reduction of the high percentage of students who repeat a course, which contributes to the increase of early school dropout. LOMLOE emphasizes the urgent need to avoid repetition as a strategy to address learning difficulties.

Another identifying factor influencing early school dropout is the country of origin. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (2023), there is a marked educational difference between national and foreign students. The data show that foreign students are twice as likely

to drop out of school compared to their Spanish counterparts, and 50% less likely to access university education. Specifically, 29% of foreign-born young people drop out of school without completing secondary education. In addition, while 46.7% of Spaniards over the age of 25 have higher education, this percentage drops to 31.2% among those born outside the country.

In this regard, a study conducted by Carrasco et al. (2020) indicates that in Spain 75% of young foreigners aspire to obtain a higher degree. However, one in three of these young people drop out of school prematurely before starting post-compulsory studies. The research places as one of the main causes of this abandonment the low confidence they perceive on the part of the teachers. However, it would be imprecise to carry out an analysis of the factors that influence dropout rates without taking into account the “mother language” factor. In this sense, Hernández-Prados and Alcaraz (2018) carried out an exhaustive literature review on studies developed with respect to the incidence factors of premature school dropout, finding that language appeared as a handicap in 7.3% of them. In this regard, the studies developed by González-Rodríguez et al. (2019) and Rizo and Hernández (2019) show how foreign students with non-Spanish mother tongue have a higher

risk of abandonment prematurely, in many cases, without completing compulsory secondary studies.

In addition to the above variables, in the analysis of the identity factors of the students it is important to consider the “place of residence” as an important factor of incidence. In this sense, a study developed by Santamaría (2020) shows that students residing in densely populated populations abandoned 16.6%, when they live in areas with intermediate density, the percentage rises to 19%, being in areas with low density where there is more school dropout, with rates of 20.6%. Taking these figures, the geographical factor could be determined as a variable of incidence, considering that, in turn, this aspect is mediated by other contextual factors such as the socioeconomic and cultural level of the family and the ease of access to the study center (Eira & Yarce, 2021).

Based on the analysis of the literature on school dropout and its link with certain traits of the identity of the individual, this study poses the main research question “What is the influence of certain identity traits of students on the intentionality of dropout?”. From this question, the main objective of this study is to *analyze the influence of factors linked to the identity of students on the intention of early school dropout*, an objective in which the following work hypotheses are questioned.

**Table 1.** *Research Hypothesis*

<b>H.1</b>	Masculine students are more likely to drop out of school.
<b>H.2</b>	Older students show a greater intention to drop out of school before attaining a post-compulsory degree.
<b>H.3</b>	Foreign students say they are more likely to drop out of school.
<b>H.4</b>	Students with a non-Spanish mother tongue are at higher risk of early school dropout.
<b>H.5</b>	Students living in rural areas score more on the intention to drop out of school.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Population and sample

The study population of this research is constituted by 6131 students of the Autonomous Community of La Rioja (Spain), distributed in 46 centers, both public and private, in which the last courses of the compulsory stage and first course of the non-compulsory stage are taught.

The students invited to participate were informed about the purpose of the study and asked to

respond sincerely, since the collection and subsequent processing of data would be completely anonymous. It should be noted that the ethics committee of the university issued a favorable opinion to this investigation. In fact, the whole process was developed under the ethical code proposed by the Committee on Publications Ethics and by Estalella (2022), typical of socio-educational research with underage population. Finally, the participating sample was constituted by 1157 students belonging to 17 educational centers. With a margin of error of 1.6% and a confidence

level of 95%, this sample is considered acceptable in socio-educational studies (Herba & Rocha, 2018).

Data collection was carried out online in spring 2021. The contact with the centers was made through the General Directorate of Educational Innovation of the Government of La Rioja, who was in charge of the dissemination of the questionnaire in the schools supported with public funds through the

RACIMA platform. Therefore, the sample obtained was managed by the will of the management teams, teachers and students, so it is not a probabilistic sampling, but the questionnaire was addressed to all the individuals that make up the universe and where the sample number was obtained *de facto*. Since the characteristics of the non-participants do not differ from the participants, this is a random sample.

**Table 2.** *Sample characteristics and percentages*

Gender													
Masculine		Femenine		Other									
569	49.18%	557	48.14%	31	2.68%								
Age													
14 years		15 years		16 years		17 years		18 years		>18 years			
25	2.16%	355	30.6 %	457	39.5%	193	16.6%	72	6.22%	55	4.75%		
Place of residence													
Small town		Large village		City									
252	21.78%	349	30.18 %	556	48.06 %								
Country of origin													
Spain		Morocco		Pakistan		Romania		China		Other			
950	82.1%	50	4.32%	23	1.99%	23	1.99%	11	0.95%	100	8.64%		
Mother tongue													
Spanish		Arabic		African		French		German		English		Other	
1005	86.6%	59	5.1%	9	0.78%	5	0,43 %	2	0,17 %	1	0,09 %	74	6.4%

### 3.2 Instrument

After an exhaustive literature review focused on the main causes associated with the identity of students that influence early school leaving, an *ad hoc* questionnaire was designed. This questionnaire included variables related to this dimension, as well as items exploring the intention to leave the studies. The validation of the content of the questionnaire was carried out in a systematic and contrasted way

using the Delphi method, according to the proposal of López-Vidal and Calvo (2019). This method involves a sequence of three phases (preliminary, exploratory and final) performed by a coordinating group and a group of experts. In addition, a pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted on a sample that represented the characteristics of our study population. During this validation process, some items were removed and/or modified to improve their wording and clarity.

**Table 3.** Description of items in relation to study variables

Variables linked to student's identity			
Gender	Masculine	Mother tongue	Spanish
	Femenine		English
	Other		French
Age	14 years	Country of Origin	German
	15 years		An Arabic language
	16 years		An African language
	17 years		Other
	18 years		Spain
	>18 years		Romania
Place of residence	A small town	Country of Origin	Morocco
	A big town		Pakistan
			China
	A city		Other
Intention of early school leaving			
Intention to continue studying after that course		Likert scale (1=sure not, 5=sure yes)	
Continue to study until obtaining a degree		Likert scale (1=sure not, 5=sure yes)	
Stop studying as soon as you can		Likert scale (1=sure not, 5=sure yes)	

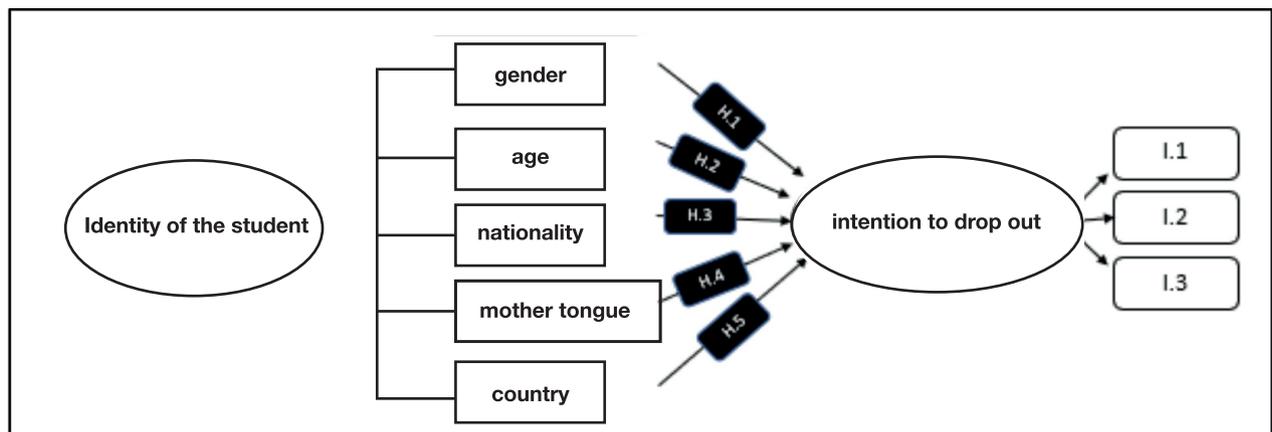
### 2.3 Data analysis

Once the data were collected, a descriptive analysis was carried out that shows the distribution of the answers given to the items on the intention

to drop out, differentiating between the different groups and representing it graphically.

After the verification of the psychometric requirements of validity and reliability, the structural model was created in order to test the hypotheses raised.

**Figure 1.** Research Analysis Model



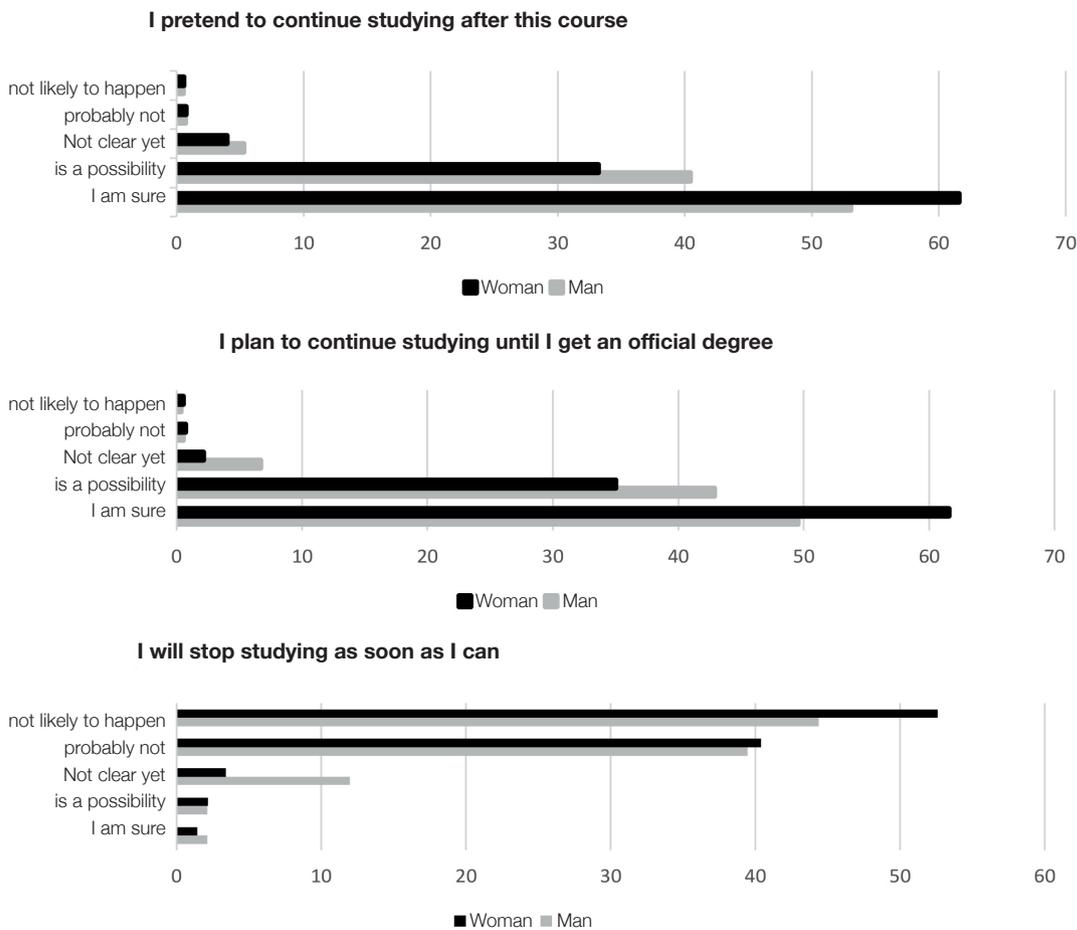
Note. Own elaboration from Suberviola (2021).

### 3. Results

As for the “gender” variable, a greater number of women say they intend to continue studying in the following school years, specifically 75% of students compared to 50% of students. On the other hand, 50% of women say they want to stay in school

even though they could do so without negative consequences, compared to a low 25% of men who say they would continue studying under such conditions. The following figure presents the graphs generated from the answers given by the students surveyed to the three items on intention to leave.

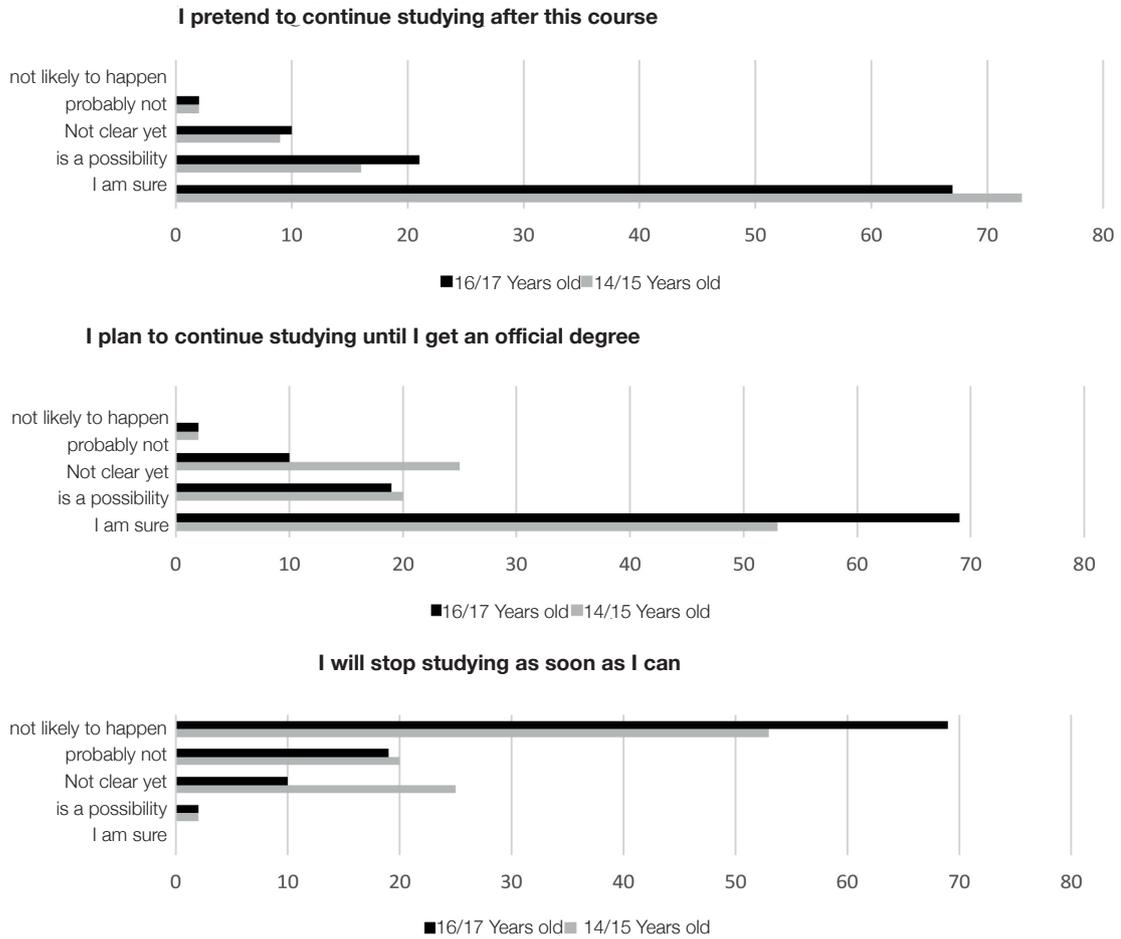
**Figure 2.** Gender vs intention to drop out



Regarding the variable “age”, some differences are observed between the different groups, being the students of  $\geq 18$  years the one who presents the greatest intention of drop out, while the younger students

present more insecurity about their academic future, since 18% of the students of 14-15 years say they are not clear if they will continue studying once obtained the official degree.

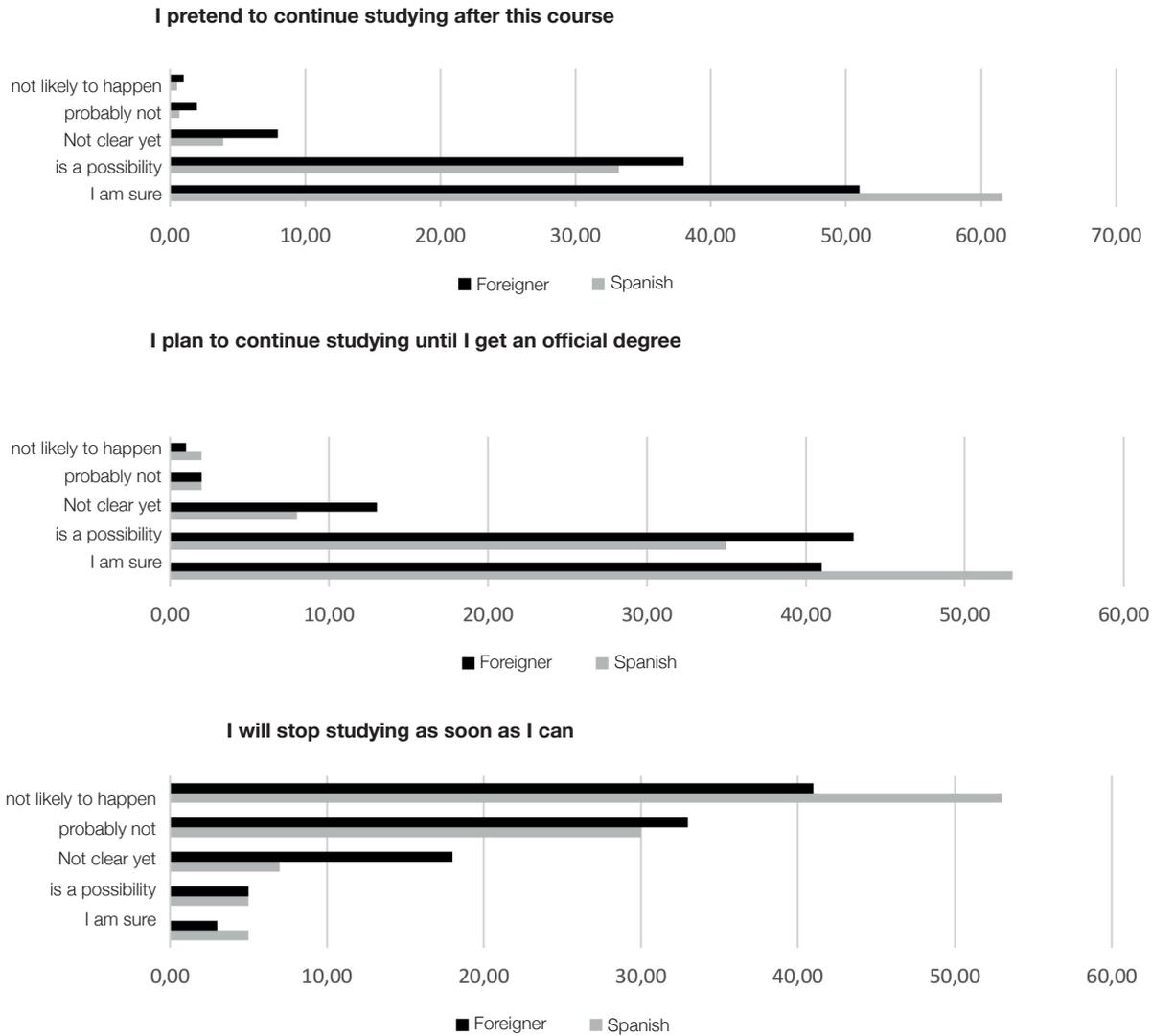
**Figure 3.** Age vs. intention to drop out



Regarding the variable “nationality”, it is observed that students with Spanish nationality have a lower intention to drop out both in the short and medium term, with a difference of more than 10 percentage points in the answer *of course* in the first two questions. Among foreign students, those from

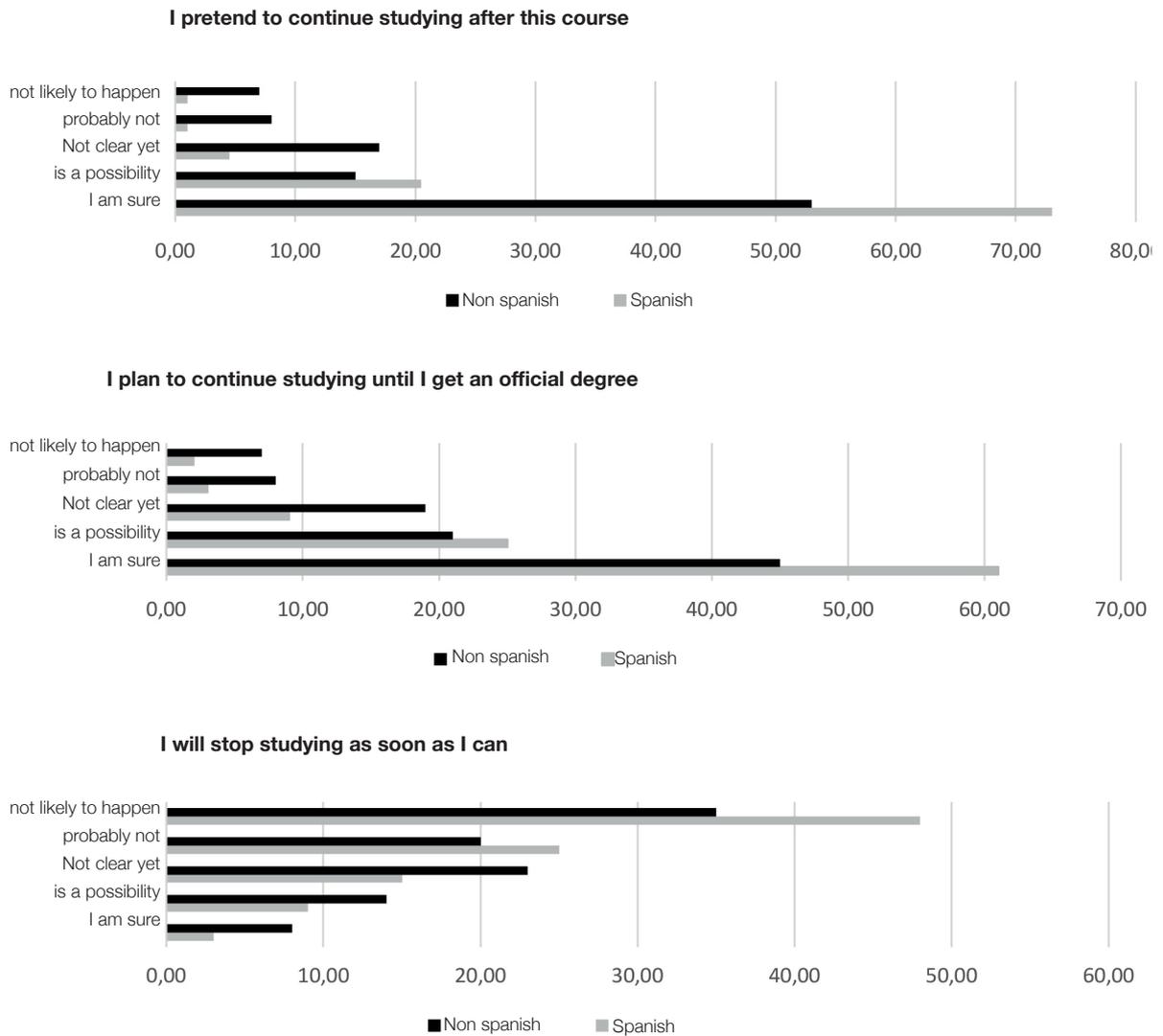
Romania are the group of students who affirm a greater intention to continue studying the next year. As for the *intention parameter to drop out as soon as possible*, the greatest number of affirmative answers are obtained from students from Morocco.

**Figure 4. Nationality vs. intention to drop out**



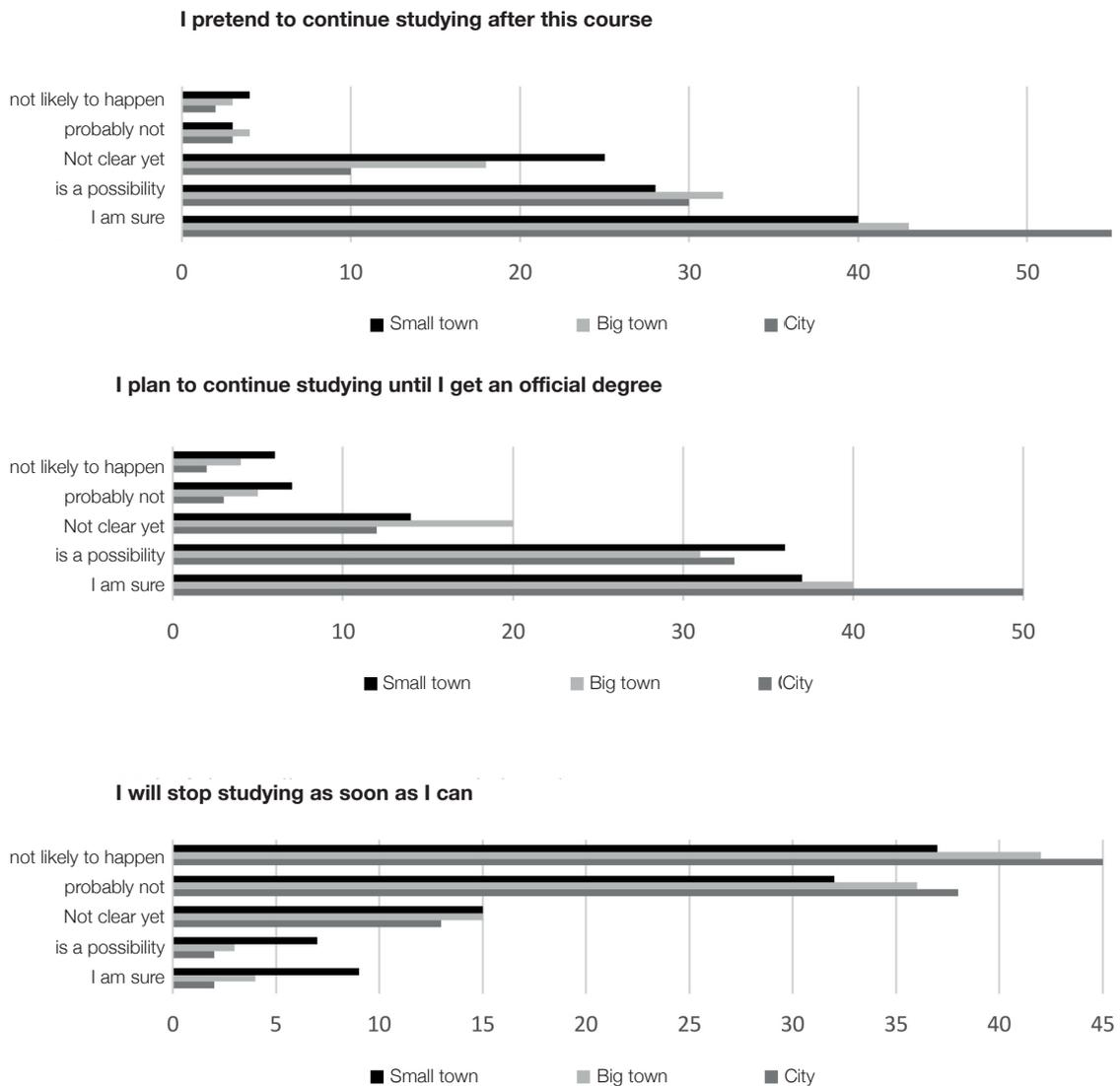
As seen in Figure 5, students with a non-Spanish mother tongue have a lower intention of continuing their studies both in the short and long term, compared to students with a Spanish mother tongue, whether or not they are Spanish nationals.

**Figure 5.** *Mother tongue vs. intention to drop out*



As for the variable “place of residence” we can see how the student residing in the city is the one who has the greatest intention of continuing the studies in the short and long term, while the student residing in rural areas affirms the greatest intention of abandoning the studies as soon as they can do so.

**Figure 6.** Place of residence vs intention to drop out



#### 4. Discussion

Few issues related to education are as complex but necessary to address as the problem of Early School dropout, due to the consequences of this phenomenon both at the individual level in people who decide to drop out school early, and at the collective level in the social and economic fields (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019; González-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2021).

Consistent with the objective, based on an exhaustive literature review and the results found in the study, the hypotheses raised are discussed.

Regarding the hypothesis “Masculine students have a greater intention to drop out of school”, the percentages obtained in the study point suggest this hypothesis is true. These data corroborate other research that concludes that gender can be taken as a predictive characteristic of the dropout of studies, positioning it as one of the protective factors of it (Choi de Mendizábal & Calero, 2013; Rizo & Hernández, 2019; Rodríguez-Pineda & Zamora, 2021; Sáinz et al., 2021; Sánchez-Alhambra, 2017; Santana et al., 2023). The results obtained should make us reflect on a gender differential socialization that can mediate the actions and academic decisions of women, in addition to other socio-educational

conditions that influence the masculine students present less intention to continue studying. A fact that could explain these results is that feminine students consider, to a greater extent than men, that obtaining a degree will allow them better access to the labor market, which will provide them with better employment and salary, in addition to greater social prestige. This observation is supported by data provided by the Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations (2019). These data show that, despite having a similar level of education, women tend to receive lower wages and hold fewer senior positions compared to men. It is notable that women predominate in sectors such as services, health and education, as well as in administrative roles and occupations that do not require formal qualifications. However, even within the same educational level, feminine-dominated professions tend to have lower average wages than others, suggesting that occupational segregation also contributes to widening wage differences between men and women.

In the hypothesis “Older students show greater intention to drop out school before achieving a post-compulsory degree”, the results suggest that this hypothesis is true. However, it should be considered that students over 17 years old who have responded to our survey necessarily had to repeat some school year and there are important number of studies that affirm that the repetition of school year, regardless of the stage in which it occurs, can be labeled as one of the most important indicators that foresee Early School Drop out (Camacho, 2018; Cerdà et al., 2020). Currently, Spain leads the repetition rate with 9% of repetitive students in the first three ESO courses, quadrupling the European Union average, which stands at 2% (González, 2021). Current education legislation recognizes this problem and seeks to address it by reducing the extraordinary rate of repetition and the consequent increase in early school dropout. In this regard, measures and resources are being implemented to reduce this percentage. The Organic Law of Modification of the Organic Law of Education (LOMLOE) of 2020 establishes conditions for repeating the course to go from being an ordinary practice to being an exceptional measure. It is sought that repetition be adopted only after having exhausted other means for the recovery of unrealized learnings.

Several studies carried out on the relationship between repetition and effectiveness in PISA tests

show that the results of the evaluations carried out related to the key competences of repeating students are clearly lower than those of non-repeaters, pointing out that repetition does not have a favorable impact on school performance, but on the contrary, makes it a predictor of failure and drop out of studies (Francesch, 2020; García-Perales & Jiménez-Fernández, 2018), so the OCDE recommends its reduction to promote a more egalitarian and effective education “The less repetition, the more equitable the educational system and the less close association between the student’s socioeconomic level and his performance” (OECD, 2021, p. 11).

Regarding the hypothesis “Foreign students affirm greater intention to drop out studies”, the study shows that Spanish students have a lower intention to drop out than foreign students. Specifically, those students who come from Morocco show a greater intention to drop out the studies as soon as possible, data that correlate with the research carried out by Carrasco et al. (2018), González-Rodríguez et al. (2019), Nada et al. (2020) and Rizo and Hernández (2019). However, this hypothesis must necessarily be interpreted along with the hypothesis “Students with a non-Spanish mother tongue have a higher risk of early school dropout”, which, as the data show, non-Spanish students have a higher rate of dropout, being specifically those whose first language is Arabic the ones with the greatest intention of drop out. The results obtained in both hypotheses can be influenced by the political-educational actions related to the attention to diversity that are developed in the schools participating in the study.

In this sense, it should be considered that students with Specific Needs of Educational Support (ACNEAE), either due to lack of knowledge of the language or due to late incorporation into the educational system, have higher rates of school dropout (García-Gracia & Sánchez-Gelabert, 2021; Ros, 2021) and in these cases, as stated by the European Agency for special need and inclusive education (2018), policies aimed at reducing school dropout are correct in including ACNEAE students for these circumstances as a group of potential risk, ensuring that interventions are carried out to keep this group in the educational system, although they have a specific character, they are integrated into educational practices. Likewise, it is considered essential to deploy actions that respond to individual character-

ristics and carry out premature interventions in the face of individual difficulties, from inclusive practices, when reducing Early School Dropout in general and in students with these traits in particular.

As for the last hypothesis raised in this study “Students living in rural areas score more on the intention to drop out of school”, it can be observed that the differences are not significant between groups. One of the possible explanations to this phenomenon could be due to the educational level, since rural areas have a population with a lower level of education than cities (Santamaría, 2018), so it is possible to think that the accompaniment of families in the educational aspects is higher among parents with higher socio-cultural levels, a population group that lives in a greater percentage in urban areas, being their sons and daughters the main protective aspect of the ESD. The fact that there is a higher intention rate to abandon small towns may have its explanation in that we are in an Autonomous Community with a high per capita income, with wine and agriculture being one of the biggest engines of the rural economy, which would place the population of rural areas in a medium-high economic position due to agricultural work that does not need certification. This phenomenon that is typical of some Autonomous Communities can have an impact on a greater intention of drop out since there is the possibility of accessing to the labor market without qualifications (Casquero and Navarro, 2010; Martín-Quintana et al., 2015; Subirats, 2006), in many cases continuing with the family’s companies and agricultural tasks in which there can be a medium-high income without a degree. In this line of research, some studies have found a positive relationship between living in areas with youth unemployment rates above the national average and the likelihood of continuing studies. This trend can be interpreted because of the lower opportunity cost for individuals to extend their education in these circumstances. In other words, high youth unemployment can act as an incentive for young people to remain in the education system (Casquero & Navarro, 2010; Subirats, 2006). However, this situation is largely not observed in rural areas of the Community of La Rioja, where agriculture and the wine sector offer high employment opportunities, especially for men (AFI, 2020). In this regard, taking into account the data obtained in reference to the place of residence, educational

institutions in rural areas, as well as those in depressed and marginal areas as mentioned above, should be an alert to possible cases of ESD and work to a greater extent, if possible, prophylactic aspects such as motivation and/or involvement of families.

## 5. Conclusion

From the idea of an inclusive and equitable education proposed at the global level by the 2030 Agenda (Naciones Unidas, 2018) and the LOMLOE (2020) at the national level, this study analyzes the underlying factors related to the identity of the students of potential influence on the intention to drop out studies with the ultimate aim that the different socio-educational institutions can implement more accurate, precise, effective and efficient measures and actions that are constituted as prophylactic actions that protect those students at higher risk of dropout. In short, it is crucial to develop an educational model that considers the diversity of students with the aim of achieving effective inclusion. This implies minimizing various physical, sensory, cognitive and sociocultural barriers that students may face to promote equal opportunities in access and permanence in education. From this perspective, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a strong framework to address these needs and ensure an accessible and enriching educational environment for all students.

The main findings in this regard suggest that some identity traits of students influence the purpose of students to continue their training process. Specifically, it has been found that masculine students have a higher rate of intention to drop out school prematurely, possibly due to the difference in job opportunities between genders without obtaining a degree. In addition, the study also shows that older students have the least intention of continuing with studies until obtaining a post-compulsory degree, a variable mediated by the weight of the repetition of some school year in early school dropout.

Along with these findings, foreign students, especially those with a non-Spanish language, have a greater intention of drop out. In this sense, socio-educational policies of attention to diversity and specifically to students with ACNEAE linked to these characteristics are relevant.

Living in rural areas is a factor of incidence in the ESD, possibly related with other factors such as the lower educational level of families or the greater possibility of accessing the labor market without degrees.

In conclusion, it is important that the educational system, considering the identity aspects of the students, deploys effective actions aimed at mitigating the ESD. Considering these aspects of the students implies recognizing and valuing the diversity in the classroom, allowing to create an inclusive educational environment where people feel understood, respected and represented. In this way, recognizing and valuing their identity strengthens their self-esteem and motivation, which contributes to reduce dropout rates. For this, it is convenient to design pedagogical strategies that are culturally relevant and contextualized, incorporating in the curriculum content that reflects the socio-cultural diversity of students, thus promoting an education that is meaningful and relevant for all.

Likewise, addressing the identity aspects of students promotes the elimination of structural and socioeconomic barriers that influence school dropout. This means implementing policies and programs that provide equality of opportunity, access to resources, and additional support to students with various disadvantages. In doing so, they are given the tools to overcome obstacles and reach their maximum educational potential.

Considering student identities and taking action to mitigate early school dropout is essential to building an inclusive and equitable education system, since it promotes equal opportunities, strengthens students' identity and self-esteem, creates a meaningful learning environment, and removes barriers that hinder access to and retention in education. Only through conscious and deliberate actions can a more just and equitable society be built, where all students can reach their fully potential.

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