Decisions, Practices and Priorities

A Qualitative Study on University Dropout and Personal Development in Panama

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Dedication

For all what you deserved and I couldn't give you.
Oris, this one is for you.

Gabisel

Acknowledgements

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the relationship between sociocultural factors and community practices connected to university dropouts in Panama. It also examines the outcomes that dropping out has had on former dropouts' personal development.

Previous research indicates that there is an extensive set of social, economic, cultural and other variables involved in the process of dropping out from university. This study considers socio-cultural factors associated with the dropout phenomenon in Panama City and San Miguelito, Panama. Synthesizing these factors, ideas on community, culture and perceptions on personal development also arose. This study proposes a conceptual model linking socio-cultural factors, practices within the students' community that have an effect on their dropout decision, and the negative or positive outcomes that influenced their personal development.

This study is motivated by one main research question: How do socio-cultural practices influence higher education dropout in Panama and what are its consequences on personal development? To examine this question, a phenomenological interpretative approach was conducted using qualitative research methods and was divided into two phases. A sample of former dropouts in the cohort of 2001-2010 and community members was gathered by using purposeful snowball sampling and later interviewed. Also interviews to experts and focus group discussions were performed.

In the first phase, data from existing government statistics, surveys and semi-structured interviews provided the necessary evidence to describe the university dropout phenomenon from the perspective of former dropouts and the socio-cultural influences affecting them. The second phase of the study explores former dropouts` personal development after leaving their studies out of their own experiences.

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the actual situation to be faced by prospective and current university students by documenting external influences that affect them on a daily basis. This study, along with other previous studies, will help policy makers in their attempts to overcome dropout rates in the Panamanian higher education system.

Key words: higher education, university dropouts, socio-cultural practices, personal development.

Kurzfassung

Die vorliegende qualitative Studie untersucht das Verhältnis von soziokulturellen Faktoren und Gemeinschaftspraktiken bezogen auf Studienabbrecher*innen in Panama. Weiterhin untersucht die Arbeit den Einfluss eines Studienabbruchs auf die persönliche Entwicklung der Studienabbrecher*innen.

Bisherige Forschungen in diesem Feld zeigen, dass ein umfangreiches Set an Faktoren – u.a. soziale, ökonomische und kulturelle – Teil des Prozesses eines Studienabbruchs sind. Diese Studie berücksichtigt soziokulturelle Faktoren, die im Zusammenhang mit dem Phänomen des Studienabbruchs in Panama City und San Miguelito zu berücksichtigen sind. Aus der Synthese dieser Faktoren haben sich auch Ideen zum Lebensraum, Kultur und Wahrnehmung von persönlicher Entwicklung ergeben. Diese Studie schlägt ein Modell vor, das sowohl soziokulturelle Faktoren und Gemeinschaftspraktiken innerhalb des Lebensraums von Studienabbrecher*innen, die die Entscheidung über den Abbruch bedingen, als auch die Folgen für die persönliche Entwicklung miteinander verknüpft.

Die Forschungsfrage dieser Studie lautet dementsprechend: *Wie beeinflussen soziokulturelle Praktiken den Abbruch höherer Bildung in Panama und was sind die Konsequenzen für die persönliche Entwicklung?* Um diese Frage zu beantworten, wurde ein phänomenologisch-interpretativer Zugang gewählt, der sich Methoden der qualitativen Forschung bedient und sich in zwei Phasen unterteilt. Ein Sample aus ehemaligen Studienabbrecher*innen in der Kohorte 2001-2010 und Mitgliedern des Lebensraums wurde mittels snowball sampling zusammengetragen und interviewt. Weiterhin wurden Expert*inneninterviews und Gruppendiskussionen durchgeführt. In der ersten Phase wurden Daten aus Regierungsstatistiken, Umfragen und Leitfadeninterviews untersucht, die als Grundlage dienten, um sowohl das Phänomen des Studienabbruchs aus der Sicht der Studienabbrecher*innen, als auch die sozio-kulturellen Bedingungen zu beschreiben. Die zweite Phase der Studie untersucht die persönliche Entwicklung, nachdem sie ihr Studium abgebrochen haben, basierend auf ihren Erfahrungen.

Die Ergebnisse der Studie tragen zum Verständnis der Situation bei, in der sich Studierende und zukünftig Studierende befinden, indem die externen Einflüsse, die sie täglich betreffen, offengelegt werden. Die Ergebnisse der Studie können neben vorherigen Studien den politischen

Entscheidungsträger*innen dabei helfen, die Studienabbruchsquoten im höheren Bildungssystem Panamas zu überwinden.

Schlagwörter: Höhere Bildung, Studienabbruch, soziokulturelle Praktik, Lebensraum, persönliche Entwicklung

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1. CHAPTER   Introduction

Education has a key role in the development of societies. Certainly, all transformations related with development will be responsible for individuals and societies' control over their future (Stiglitz, 2002). Indeed, education enhances people's life enrichment by expanding their horizons and reducing their weaknesses as society members. Starting from the reinforcing of social interconnection, the consolidation of projects with a biographical and professional focus, to the construction of balance in democratic integration, education promotes the development of chances for social participation and personal growth (Aparicio, 2009).

In a worldwide perception, it is a somehow controversial truth that any country's evolution is conditioned to the educational progress of the nation (Agbo, 2005; Freire, Núñez & Teijeiro, 2012). Controversial indeed, but educational progress has not been addressed by many Latin-American countries as it should be. The topic of "education" has been mentioned in former internationally agreed education declarations with the intention of meeting the educational needs of children, youth, and adults by 2015. For example, UNESCO promoted the "Education for All" (EFA) movement goals during the World Education Forum in 2000 where 6 goals were identified to be achieved by 2015.

From the EFA goals, goals #3 and #5 relate to learning needs of young people and adults. After that, in 2002, the "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs) were instituted after discussions about development. From these MDGs, goal #2 relates to access to universal primary education. And, at United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, the recent institution of the SDGs (2015) has Goal #4[1], with a focus on education quality as a key impact factor towards poverty alleviation.

It must be said that education is not only beneficial to poverty reduction, but also to all aspects of people's life development. Being that these objectives hold the set of skills and behaviors that every person is expected to perform and achieve as a student, it is undeniable that education has a crucial role in developing countries since it empowers social and economic growth (Close, 2014).

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[1] SDG goal #4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Unfortunately, while developed countries pay more attention to how to enhance their education policies and develop programs to fill any gaps, developing countries have only filled half of the existing educational gap on skill deficits (Hanushek, 2013). Within the typical student outcomes[2], educational outcomes[3] such as dropouts[4] have a negative connotation and a high undesirable impact on students, thus impacting their personal development. Moreover, theorists on the matter explain this fact by trying to portray academic education outcomes as a consequence of ineffective social interaction, due to unhappiness or economic issues such as a weak financial position of students before completing their university studies (Tinto, 1975; Ramirez & Corvo, 2007).

As a matter of fact, becoming a university dropout can have severe consequences for the individual such as dissatisfaction with life, loss of self-confidence, lower likelihood to attain a well-paying job, decreased family life interaction and family-like ties, mental and physical health situation, reduced personal fulfillment and values (Hoeschler & Backes-Gellner, 2014). Dropping out from studies can also have consequences within the local community such as criticism or gossiping, stigma among community members, higher risk of unemployment or underemployment, lessened family involvement with the community and lower community interaction.

In addition, there are also consequences to the country itself such as less-educated workforce, lower incomes, waste of a community's institutional resources, diminished family values, health issues, and decreased human and social capital (OECD 2006, OECD 2015, Calderon Pimentel 2012). Regarding the present global education situation, Chickering and Gamson

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[2] The term student outcomes typically refers to either the desired learning objectives or standards that schools and teachers want students to achieve, or the educational, societal, and life effects that result from students being educated. In the first case, student outcomes are the intended goals of a course, program, or learning experience; in the second case, student outcomes are the actual results that students either achieve or fail to achieve during their education or later on in life. The terms learning outcomes and educational outcomes are common synonyms. Source: The Glossary of Education Reform (http://edglossary.org) –For the purpose of this study, the second definition will be used.

[3] The results achieved by schools may also be considered "educational outcomes" by educators and others, including results such as standardized-test scores, graduation rates, and college-enrollment rates. In this sense, the term may be synonymous with student achievement. Source: The Glossary of Education Reform (http://edglossary.org)

[4] The term dropout is a synonym to attrition, abandonment, or departure. It is "a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems…continually modify his goals and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout" as defined by Tinto (1975:94).

(1991) also claim that "the dramatic changes in social conditions and economic requirements make effective postsecondary education a critical requirement for effective citizenship, productive work, and global competitiveness" (p.1).

In order to portray the issues that come up from faulty, ineffective and non-existent higher education chained to external factors that may also affect the individual, I intend to perform this study only with tertiary education level students, specifically university students, since these are the ones most related to this concern.

No doubt education is vital for economic development, but education dropout outcomes may not only be related to economic growth and/or have a negative connotation. In this study, I will identify out of the participants' perceptions how dropout decisions can also lead to positive outcomes for the individual.

I assume that these positive outcomes could be variables such as increased life satisfaction levels, increased family and community life, better physical and mental health situation, strengthened values, increase of cultural and social capital, rational employment decisions and effective business opportunities (entrepreneurship), and getting a higher income because of a better paying job that does not always require previous university studies.

Dropouts at the academic level have been described as individual and institutional failures (Tichenor & Cosgrove, 1991; Howley, 1994; Stoll, 2002). However, there should be an opportunity for the person to define and understand his or her own dropout causes and consequently to analyze whether the outcomes of the decision to drop out leads to failure or not. Thus, this study intends to investigate the sociocultural practices[5] involved in the decision of dropping out and also the individual perceptions of its positive or negative outcomes toward their personal development.

1.1. Statement of the problem

As this study will only make reference to individuals at the tertiary level of education (University), specifically BA degrees and equivalent obtained

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[5] Practice is a rich if contested term on which sociologists converge when they endeavor to portray human action in its cultural and institutional settings. Concepts of practice highlight the influence of taken-for-granted, pre-theoretical assumptions on human conduct (Biernacki, 1995).

through university studies, some general numbers from recent years are provided to broaden the understanding of the reported Panamanian university population in 2002 and 2013.

According to Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos (OEI, 2002) and CTF[6], in Panama there are five official or public universities and 18 private universities. The official universities have served more than 80,000 students each year; those being:

- University of Panama (UP) founded in 1935,
- Technological University of Panama (UTP) founded in 1981,
- University of Chiriquí (UNACHI) founded in 1994,
- The Specialized University of the Americas (Universidad Especializada de las Americas, UDELAS) founded in 1997, and
- Universidad Maritima de Panama (UMIP) founded in 2005.

Four of these institutions (University of Panama, Technological University of Panama, The Specialized University of the Americas and Universidad Maritima) are located in the metropolitan area of transit that is comprised within the districts of Panama, San Miguelito and Arraiján. These are located strategically for their main link with the Panamanian economic structure, in which 50% of the total population is concentrated in the capital.

Recent national reports give us a more precise view with respect to an extensive increment in registration rates, as shown in table 1. These registration rates include all students registered in all universities, official and private, around the country by 2013. Conversely, it can be inferred that university dropout rates in Panama have also increased year by year (Fiegehen, 2005); however, the phenomenon has not yet been measured in numbers.

Therefore, it can be presumed true that there is also an increase in dropout rates from a comparison of registration numbers to graduation numbers; although the reasons for the reduction in graduation numbers has not been ascertained or causally related to dropout numbers. For instance, Table 1

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[6] The Technical Commission of Inspection (Comision Tecnica de Fiscalizacion) is the agency through which the University of Panama, in coordination with the rest of the official universities, supervises the functioning of private universities with the purpose of guaranteeing the quality and belonging of teaching. CTF is formed by the rectors of the official universities or their representatives and it is chaired by the Rector of the University of Panama.

provides an example of general university registration and graduation rates between the years 2004 to 2014 within the country.

Year	Registration	Graduation
2014	142,725	26,721
2013	124,375	23,752
2012	140,303	22,786
2011	133,497	22,172
2010	139,116	21,821
2009	135,209	21,706
2008	134,054	21,061
2007	132,660	20,182
2006	130,838	19,679
2005	128,075	
2004	128,863	

Table 1. Number of registered and graduated students in Panama
Source: Contraloria General de la Republica de Panama (INEC)

Dropout rates are not shown, however, because there are no manual or automated records in order to track them. In fact, students from official universities are not required to do any "de-registration" paperwork after leaving or quitting their studies. Therefore, the lack of de-registration data and thus, the uncertainty of dropout rates is an issue that is present in the Panamanian university education system and its economic impact has still not been assessed.

While every year new education institutions or universities try to make inroads into what I would describe as the "education business blast", it seems that all the input is directed to enrollment increments without controlling students' academic dropout rates; and Panama does not escape this dropout issue. Studies on Panamanian student dropouts in higher education are scarce and mostly oriented toward estimating the magnitude of the phenomenon in quantities and not the intrinsic, in-depth reasons. No doubt, the education dropout phenomenon may be a manifestation of both individual and institutional failures, affecting the self-esteem and performance of a person within society, and evidencing inefficiencies, inequities and the lack of credibility of the system (Calderon Pimentel, 2012; Rianda, 2008).

1.2.   Research aims and objectives

In order to stimulate a reflection on the university dropout phenomenon in Panama City, an ethnographic and empirical analysis was conducted with the intention to come out with meaningful understandings of the participants' self-reflections on their dropout experiences. It must be said again that the aim of this study is to do more than point out the sources and outcomes of dropping out; it is also to maximize the abundance and accuracy of data, to interpret and clarify the consequences, as well as to disseminate the study findings on the matter.

With this study I intend to reveal the possibility of socio-cultural factors associated with the students` local communities or neighborhoods where they live in contrasts with the higher education dropout issue, rather than only build on dropout phenomenon statistics. As there may be many reasons for interrupting studies, this study aims at disclosing how sociocultural practices specifically have an effect on the university dropout decision of individuals and to provide an analysis on the consequences of having interrupted university studies in a permanent way regardless of motivations.

The study will involve an analysis of relevant influential aspects of the phenomenon of dropouts, during the evolution of higher education in Panama. It will also examine the effects that this phenomenon has on personal development, from a social point of view. Therefore, two key objectives will structure this study.

- The general objectives of this study are to identify factors that influence the dropout decision, identify and define socio-cultural practices among the individual's community which are connected to the dropout decision and also to describe how this phenomenon influenced their personal development.

- The specific objectives of this study, on a scientific level, are to contribute to the literature on academic topics regarding social and cultural aspects involving university students and their life, and their effects on the individual's personal development. On an institutional level, the objective is to provide references on issues that could have been prevented by educational institutions with better organization and vocational guidance or counselling prior to the university entrance process.

Examination of these objectives requires an approach that not only describe relationships and cultural practices in the community context but also everyday experiences of people. Besides, there is a great opportunity for

appreciating behaviors from an individual's perspective, and for documenting the development of socio-cultural practices within the individual's environment over a period of time. Moreover, the research also intends to point out the cultural or intercultural perspectives of the participants with regards to their life within the local community or neighborhood where they live.

This study was performed in a limited geographical area within the province of Panama and does not attempt to generalize its findings as the common behavior among all university students in Panama. As a matter of fact, my objective is to provide researchers and further studies with a new perspective in examining the dropout phenomenon by offering the participant's perception of their own life.

I, as a researcher, strongly believe that this study and its results may be considered inconclusive and not representative. Its purpose is rather to address the influence of many other factors found in the context of university students living in Panama City that may add to or differ from the ones presented by theorists in previous decades.

1.2.1. Research questions and sub-questions

The purpose of this study is to determine the interrelated socio-cultural practices that influence students' decisions to drop out of the university system. Also, the study intends to determine the outcomes of dropping out and how they affect the participant's personal and thus human development. In order to do so, one main question and a set of sub-questions are developed as follows:

Main question:

** How do socio-cultural practices influence higher education dropout in Panama and what are its consequences on personal development?

Sub-questions:

1. What factors drive students to take the decision of dropping out from university in Panama?

2. What are the socio-cultural practices that have an effect on higher education dropout decisions in Panama?

a. Where do these practices occur and who performs them?
b. How do these practices contribute to students' decisions to drop out?

3. How does dropping out affect an individual's personal development?

a. How do university students (that have dropped out) describe their personal development after dropping out?

a.1. What are the aspects involved?
a.2. What further education if any, do students engage in after dropping out?

b. How was the outcome of dropping out perceived?

b.1. By the dropout student, its family and the community.
b.2. If positive, why is this the case?
b.3. If negative, what has the participant done to overcome this?

1.3.   Potential contribution

The findings of this study will be useful for policy makers in their attempts to control dropout rates in Panamanian higher education institutions. These findings would be also useful to help understand the many reasons why Panamanian university students drop out from their studies.

If a university student drops out after studying for only some semesters, there will be a definite waste of resources from their family, the university and the society they belong to; especially in a country where resources are limited. A university student's dropout is a waste of institutional resources that should demand higher attention. Therefore, this research would contribute to the development of a general sample of information that can help visualize the actual situation to be faced by prospective pre-university and university students by documenting external influences that affect them on a daily basis.

The information provided as conclusions of this study will contribute to local government institutions such as MEDUCA[7], IFARHU[8], Universidad

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[7] Panamanian Ministry of Education.

[8] Instituto para la Formacion y el Aprovechamiento del Recurso Humano. National agency for vocational training and continuing education.

Tecnologica de Panama, University of Panama, and other official agencies such as MIDES[9] in charge of social insertion and quality of life.

This study, along with other previous studies (Rodriguez, 2002; Castillo & Arrue, 2003; Escobar, 2003; Escobar, 2005; Bernal, 2010; Calderon Pimentel, 2013), will provide a significant basis for evaluating the existing higher education system dropout phenomenon in Panama, and broaden approaches such as IESALC-UNESCO (2005)[10], Proyecto Alfa III[11], and try to bring a solution to it. It should also provide a guide of best practices to international organizations such as UNESCO, regarding successes and failures of their previous attempts or approaches toward the matter.

Furthermore, this research attempts to provide vivid information for the government to take action for the implementation of new educational and motivational achievement and lifelong development strategies to improve our new generation's prospects.

1.4. Expected Outcomes

Although outcomes may reflect difficulties in reaching participants for the study, access to students has been verbally agreed with professors at different institutions. Access to secondary data from ministries and higher education institutions may also be challenging to get since this information is only for the use of these institutions and therefore confidential. Yet, university authorities and these former students still need to give their written approval. All information provided by participants was used solely for the proposed research. Throughout the study, conscious efforts to maintain confidentiality was made.

The appreciation given to the dropout phenomenon described in this study could also be applied to most social science research topics on student attrition. Nevertheless, research and studies on socio-cultural practices and other matters regarding the dropout phenomenon affecting the

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[9] Ministry of Social Development.

[10] Estudio sobre la deserción y repitencia en la educación superior en Panamá (2005), Programa de Estudios Temáticos Sobre Diagnóstico de Los Títulos de la Educación Superior en Latinoamérica y El Caribe.

[11] The ALFA III Programme (2007-2013) Alfa III has financed a diversity of projects to improve the quality, relevance and accessibility of higher education in Latin America and further regional integration through the creation of a higher education area. https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/latin-america/regional-cooperation/alfa/index_en.htm_en

Panamanian higher education system are still at an early stage. Therefore, this research will conclude by presenting and explaining the analysis behind the empirical data for university authorities, government representatives, and all interested agencies who can take part in any reform efforts with regard to this phenomenon.

1.5.   Significance of the study

Researchers and educators would agree that there are different types of dropouts (Cabrera, Tomás, Álvarez, & Gonzalez, 2006) and that each of these types can be identified through continuous observation and with the aid of statistics as established in previous research. However, literature and statistics in this matter are scarcely found in Panama.

In the last years, few studies (Valdes, 1958; Escobar, Barria Alvarado & de Obarrio, 1982; Tirado & Hernandez 2005; Caballero, Castillo & Alvarez, 2011) have provided factual variables as latent evidence of this persistent educational phenomenon. Some of these variables include the socio-economic situation, institutional variables such as the relationship between professors and students, evaluation criteria, student's the lack of orientation toward students and the access to information from university offices, university management models, demotivation and low self-esteem of the students, emotional distress and lack of aspirations, and deficiencies in high school education, among others.

The general purpose of this study is to explore social and cultural factors surrounding former university students who dropped out and the subsequent evolution of their personal development. Specifically, I used first-hand data from these individuals, mainly provided through interviews which allowed me to identify unexpected variables. Variables which haven't been explored yet by Panamanian researchers.

This study has also made another contribution to the Panamanian dropout phenomenon and general literature by establishing that even though the term "dropout" is perceived as negative, the student who has dropped out is not necessary neglecting a path to "success". A better understanding of how cultural matters within the social environment take effect on a person's decision, specifically when dropping out from university, was manifested in all the narratives presented about dropout experiences. This new insight offers a qualitative component that was perhaps inexistent in the latest

relevant research. This perspective opens a door to future research on the social perception of personal development of an individual.

1.6.   Limitations of the study

Kvale (1996) provided the rationale for the method used in this study, suggesting, "If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them?" (p. 1).

The study assumed that the supportive secondary data (i.e. statistics) required for the research would be available to the researcher. However, at most public entities, there were no databases or records of the last decade's student registration or leave. On the other hand, private universities had complete and continuous records of registration/leave information although this information was restricted to the public for business matters only.

The location of this qualitative research was the province of Panama, therefore, the examined data are limited to a particular location and do not provide a complete analysis at a national level. The demographic data provided and the narratives elicited from the study participants were limited to what they were willing to reveal.

2. CHAPTER   The Panamanian dilemma

Panama is a multicultural and multiethnic isthmus[12] which connects North and Central America with South America (figure 1). It is situated in Central America between Costa Rica and Colombia, with a territorial extension of 75,517 Km^2. Panama has ten provinces and five indigenous reservations in which the official language is Spanish.

Year	Population	Men	Women
2016	4.037.043	2.026.044	2.010.999
2012	Urban population = 64 %		
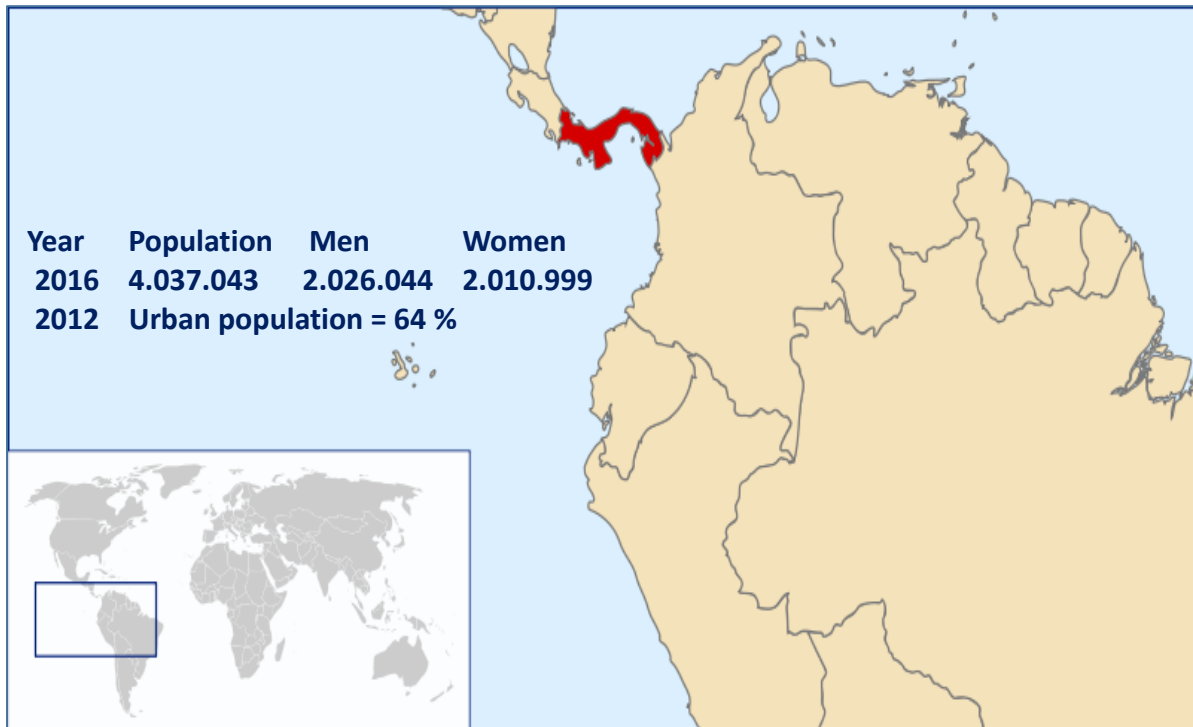
Figure 1. Location and population demographics of the Republic of Panama.
Source: Estimaciones y Proyecciones de la Población Total del País, por Sexo y Edad: años 1950-2050. Situación Demográfica, Boletín Nº 13. (INEC)

Today, Panama has a population of under five million people (4,037,043 as of 2016), divided into 49.81% women and 50.19% men as of 2016 (figure 2).

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[12] An isthmus is a narrow strip of land connecting two larger land areas.

Population pyramid of the Republic of Panama
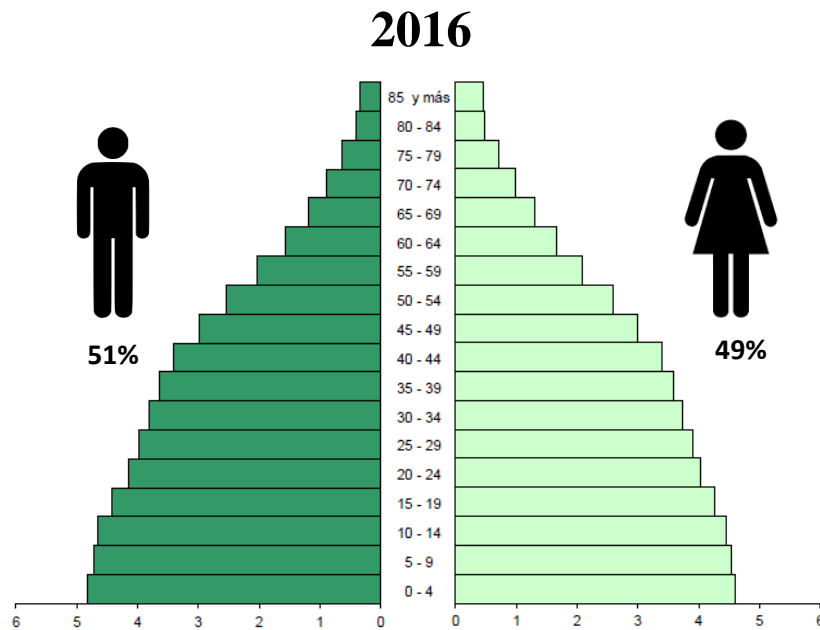
2016

Figure 2. Population pyramid of the Republic of Panama.
Source: Pirámide de la Población de la República de Panamá, 2016. (INEC)

Of this population, 10.34% are indigenous people distributed in eight ethnic groups throughout the country amounting to 4.5% in urban areas such as the Districts of Panama and San Miguelito as shown in table 2[13] (INEC, 2010). These two districts are located in the center of the Province of Panama and were chosen for this study as they are in the center of the city where all universities converge and the highest proportion of university students are found.

DISTRICT	AVERAGE PERSONS PER HOUSING	PERCENTAGE OF HOMES WITH MEN CHIEF	PERCENTAGE OF HOMES WITH WOMEN CHIEF	AVERAGE AGE OF POPULATION	PERCENTAGE POPULATION FROM 15 TO 64 YEARS	PERCENTAGE INDIGENOUS POPULATION
PANAMÁ	3.4	67.12 %	32.88 %	29	67.76 %	3.65 %
SAN MIGUELITO	3.8	66.21 %	33.79 %	29	67.85 %	2.70 %

Table 2. Socio-demographic indicators of the population. Source: INEC, 2010

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[13]   The province of Panama has historically been a center of attraction for internal migration, both for indigenous as well as non-indigenous, given its economic boom compared to the rest of the country. In the decade 2000 - 2010 the indigenous population located in the province of Panama increased on the order of 10%. There was a decrease of 0.5% in urban areas and an increase of 45.8% in the rural areas. Large families are part of the indigenous worldview in which children represent a potential source of labor on family farms, except the Kuna Yala reservation. For the indigenous peoples, the Comarca institution or reservation is not only a way of guaranteeing their lands, but it is also a mechanism for the conservation of traditional cultural practices and the exercise of a government in charge of the indigenous people themselves. (Diagnóstico de la Población Indígena de Panamá con base en los Censos de Población y Vivienda de 2010, INEC)

2.1. Colonialism, diversity and inequalities

According to Quijano (2000, 2015), coloniality[14] was initiated by performing a racial division. With this division, the classification of races was imposed and used as the beginning of a pattern of power which disturbs all areas of society. Colonialism was imposed knowledge and the practice of it. And, it is certainly the European capitalism that by means of the conquest of the new world, exposed the previously uncontacted cultures to the process of domination of colonialism (Solano, 1992).

Panama has experienced colonialism too. First, during the colonization of the Americas under the Spanish rule in the 16th century and later, in 1821, with the union with the Great Colombia. More recently, after the independence from Colombia in 1903, colonialism has come in the form of all the US interventions in the country, including the military invasion in 1989 and the control of the Panama Canal until 1999.

Panama has unique characteristics. It shares poverty and underdevelopment with most Central American countries but has a particularly strong influence from the United States, which is unwelcomed by many yet welcomed by those who expect economic stability from the US dollar (Rodriguez Reyes, 2017). Therefore, the general decolonization of the nowadays Panama is a process that struggles between subjection of the political leaders and the social and cultural elite. This subjection always sticks to the interests of the immediate ruling power and also shapes social and cultural inequalities around education.

To illustrate the chronological events that shaped Panamanian identity and culture, I will start with the fact that after being first colonized in 1501 and being the narrowest piece of land of America, Panamanian history has been governed by three other colonial powers. First was the Spanish crown and its devastating entrance to the isthmus, making it a leading crossroad for intercontinental travel. Later was Panama's unification with Colombia in 1821, which increased the attention of foreign settlers. In 1846, Colombia signed a treaty[15] with the US for the construction of the Panama railroad.

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[14] The process of colonial domination. In this case I refer to the Spanish colonization of the American continent.

[15] The Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty was an international agreement concluded between Panama and the United States on November 18, 1903, a few days after the separation of Panama from Colombia. This treaty practically placed Panama under the tutelage of the US and allowed a 10-mile-wide strip to be taken over which the Panama Canal would pass, called the Panama Canal Zone.

This great construction project brought migrant workers including afro-descendants of slaves from the Caribbean and also Chinese.

In 1903, Panama declared the independence from Colombia which opened the doors to the United States and granted them rights to construct an interoceanic canal and own its surrounding lands. In 1914, the canal was finally finished and triggered frequent US intervention in Panamanian affairs. In 1977, the US and the Panamanian governments signed two treaties[16] with the aim of eventually giving back the canal and surroundings to Panama. This event united all the mixed race Panamanians for the sake of Panamanian sovereignty (Corniff, 2001).

The demographic changes during the Panama-Colombian period (1821-1903) were denoted by an increase in the Panamanian population as a result of the migration of North Americans, Europeans, West-Indians, Chinese and Indians around the construction of the railroad and the Canal. These immigrants did not move to Colombia but to the Panamanian territory to establish themselves as merchants or merely pass through to reach other lands (Vega, Jáuregui & Ortiz, 2003).

It is precisely in this period when the influence of the US fostered a change; where this neocolonial power characterized by inequalities in the country started to change the future of the overall economic, social and cultural system. For example, during the construction of the Panama Canal, much afro-descendant labor was brought from the Caribbean islands. These day laborers, among others from other ethnicities and countries, were discriminated against in their payment, which was known as the "silver roll"[17]. It is this same discrimination that, in terms of the labor market of

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[16] The Torrijos-Carter Treaties, signed in Washington DC, United States, on September 7, 1977 between the head of the government of Panama and the president of the US. The treaty established the delivery of the administration of the Panama Canal and the closure of all US military bases in Panamanian territory. The treaties committed both countries to agree to provide a good administration, operation and adequate maintenance of the Panama Canal and the permanent neutrality and operation of the Panama Canal that guarantees free transit and neutrality in perpetuity of this.

[17] Gold and Silver payroll system was implemented by the administrators of the Canal Zone in 1904 and enforced by the US from the very beginning of the Panama Canal Zone until 1914. The system was adopted from the former railroad's policy of distinct payrolls and the segregation of the races among workers. The Gold and Silver Roll system was a copy of the racially segregated system existent in the US at that time and became the foundation for the Panama Canal Zone society and economy. Workers assigned to the "gold roll" were American citizens given higher positions such as administrative positions and posts as foremen. The "silver roll" workers were skilled European workers and unskilled workers from the West Indies and Panama. Gold-roll employees earned salaries in U.S. dollars, got housing and commissary privileges and free access to other facilities. On

those times, has been transformed through the descendants who today still work in the Panama Canal. From these families of day laborers who were discriminated against as the lowest class in those times, many are now part of the highest strata of Panamanian society.

Another example is how racial hierarchy and gender inequality mirroring US discrimination procedures of the time were also practiced in the Panama Canal Zone[18]. Zonians[19] did not embrace the Panamanian culture since US ways were mainly transported to the Canal Zone. Zonians were also divided within the scholar system. That is, there was a school for whites with white teachers and a school for blacks. It was the cultural production of a country in another country. However, black children taught in these schools were seen as privileged among all Panamanians because of the advantage of having not only foreign teachers but also learning English as their mother tongue. Thus, what was a matter of racial hierarchy and inequalities turned out to be cultural and educational capital for their upcoming generations.

2.2. Social classes and inequalities

Class division in Panama is not strict and ethnic diversity exists all over the country. To illustrate this, the Local Human Development Atlas made by UNDP in 2015 provided a picture taking into account most ethnicities found in all provinces and indigenous reservations in the Republic of Panama (see figure 3, p.23).

Panama is also a country of vast dissimilarities. Panama has Human Development Index scores similar to countries with superior industrial and natural resources; but by contrast, Panama has a large population which lives in conditions comparable to countries with extreme poverty (Bernal,

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the contrary, silver roll workers earned lower salaries paid in Colombian pesos (1 Colombian peso = U.S. $ 0.50) and were not eligible for privileges.

[18]   The Panama Canal Zone constituted a home away from home for the Americans who built and maintained the Panama Canal and the workers who supported them. It was established and controlled by the US in 1903 and covered an area of 533 square miles that ran the course of the canal. Families living in the Canal Zone enjoyed benefits such as subsidized housing, ample holiday time and huge commissions. Its residents enjoyed the more relaxed lifestyle of Panama, while also living in comfortable American-style housing, experiencing a top-notch American education and enjoying all the perks of US citizenship.

[19]   A Zonian is a US citizen born in the Panama Canal Zone. A Zonian could be of one or both US citizen parents living in the Panama Canal Zone.

2001). Another example (table 3) is that Panama's Gender Inequality Index (IDG) is high and varies according to the province or region (PNUD, 2015).

Panamá Gender Inequality Index		
Year	Ranking	Index
2016	47º	0,7207
2015	44º	0,7220
2014	46º	0,7195
2013	37º	0,7164
2012	40º	0,7122
2011	40º	0,7042
2010	39º	0,7072
2009	43º	0,7024
2008	34º	0,7095
2007	38º	0,6954
2006	31º	0,6935

Table 3. Gender Inequality Index (IDG), Panama.
Source: Datosmacro.com, 2016

The Republic of Panama exemplifies the same development problems as other countries in Central America such as rising unemployment and poverty levels, as well as consistently high illiteracy among the indigenous population. There are also nutrition problems, alongside healthcare scarcity, plus deficiencies in the education and health infrastructure. In addition, Panama has international debt, while showing broad disparities and inequalities among its population, which have been attributed to flaws in the allocation of public spending. In contrast to all these aspects of underdevelopment, Panama has been classified by international organizations as a medium-high income country with regards to per capita income and national indicators, according to the national government (UNDP, 2000).[20]

According to Latinobarometro.org[21], subjective social classes (SSS)[22] in Panama are divided as follow (table 4):

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[20] Information obtained from a national report presented by the national government to the UN in 2000.

[21] Corporación Latinobarómetro is an independent private non-profit organization based in Santiago, Chile, which conducts social science surveys in Latin America and is also responsible for publishing the results. It is mainly involved in social and political actors in Latin America. The company sees itself as independent of external influences.

[22] According to the American Psychological Association (APA), Subjective Social Status measures include perceptions of one's social standing using categories such as "working class" or "middle

Results	2011		2015		2017	
Class	cases	% Total	Cases	%/Total	Cases	%/Total
Upper	36	3.6	28	2.8	50	5
Upper middle	97	9.7	50	5	71	7.1
Middle	510	51	453	45.3	387	38.7
Lower middle	198	19.8	286	28.6	229	22.9
Working	115	11.5	147	14.7	201	20.1
Do not know	36	3.6	36	3.6	37	3.7
No answer	8	0.8	28	2.8	25	2.5
(N)	**1000**	**100**	**1000**	**100**	**1000**	**100**

Table 4. Subjective Social Classes in Panama. Source: Latinobarometro.org

Table 4 offers results from 1000 surveyed Panamanians who gave their opinion on self-perceived rank on the social hierarchy (Shaked, Williams, Evans & Zonderman, 2016) of classes in Panama. To compare and point out differences in the perception of those surveyed, I provided three different years in the same decade. According to this information, middle, lower middle and working class are the predominant classes in the country. However, it may be the case that the people surveyed on their social classes do not really know about the topic and will answer to what they feel they belong to. This is, a formal system of classification in Panama does not exist as such as in other Latin-American countries.

According to Gandasegui (2002), there is a dominant class that controls international commerce and services considered the higher class. On the other hand, there is a set of subordinate classes where a mass of informal workers prevails. Among the subordinate classes, there are salaried workers whose work converges in both the private and public sectors. Gandasegui alleges that recent adjustment policies have impoverished the population with less resources while the wealthier sector has significantly increased their participation in the country's economic development. The Middle class status applies to people with a medium socioeconomic level ranging between the working class and the upper class. This also includes people who have attended university in order to aspire for a decent but non-luxurious life with a family income good enough to educate their children.

The subjective social class stratification in Panama City is very unequal. For example, a person can live in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city

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class," or perceptions of one's social position relative to others based on income, educational attainment and occupational prestige.

and at the same time work at the Panama Canal. Panama Canal workers often earn better that in any other government institution as it is considered private. Therefore, the person may earn a very high salary, will pay high taxes and also live in an apartment which is subsidized by the government. Surprisingly, this person might be considered or consider himself as a lower class just because of the neighborhood where they live.

Regarding the salary wages, the minimum wage valid until December, 2019 is around $677 to $721 per month. This increment which takes place every two years was objected by The National Council of Private Enterprise (CONEP)[23] as being unsustainable. Contrastingly, according to MEF[24] the cost of the *canasta basica familiar*[25] is $306.08, leaving little money for other expenses such as transportation, housing and additional costs such as electricity, water and communication.

Panama's geographical position in the continent has been used as a resource in order to enhance levels of well-being for the country's population. In the new millennium the country finally took full administration and charge of the Panama Canal leading to an increasing handful of benefits such as new port investments, new laws promoting international commercial services[26] and tourism activities that will be distributed to the whole region. Panama lacks of a central bank and adopted the United States Dollar since 1904[27], which has contributed with the country's economic stability in the region.

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[23] Consejo Nacional de la Empresa Privada.

[24] Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas, MEF.

[25] Set of products that cover the minimum basic and nutritional needs of a small family.

[26] "Making up 18.53% of the country's GDP at a value of $6.6bn in 2014, transport, storage and communications has historically been a pillar of Panama's growth. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 and the subsequent handover of the passage from the US to local authorities at the end of 1999 has been a catalyst of the country's economic success. Many activities related to logistics such as transhipments, multi-modal transport, storage, consolidation, deconsolidation and others have also formed a strong sector around cargo movement. According to an analysis in the Strategic Government Plan 2015-19 (Plan Estratégico de Gobierno 2015-19, PEG), the transport sector's contribution to GDP between 2008 and 2013 shows that 42% comes from the canal, while 31% comes from land cargo and passengers, 15% from air cargo and 10% from maritime transport. The development of value-added activities has driven the country to expand in sectors such as light industry and niche logistics." (The Report: Panama 2015: Transport & Logistics: Investments in Panama's port capacity and services are diversifying transport. Retrieved on November 11, 2018 from: https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/ahead-game-investments-port-capacity-and-value-added-services-are-diversifying-sector)

[27] In 1904 there was a monetary agreement with the United States in which the US dollar and the Balboa are legal tender coins, being the Balboa the national currency.

The distribution of family income has had a great effect on the education opportunities from basic to higher education, since families with the lowest income have students (sons and daughters) with limited opportunities to complete their studies, regardless of the increasing infrastructure along the country. According to the Panamanian labor market survey in 2016, 1,777,013 persons were actively employed (22.71% of the total population). From this amount, 16.83% are men and 5.88% are women (INEC, 2016).

This issue becomes a vicious circle in which equal opportunities of education, employment and all aspects needed to have a better quality of life are determined by the family's economic situation. As a result of this vicious circle, no matter how much investment the government injects into the country's economy, the poorest and most disadvantaged will continue to stagnate in poverty while the social gap continues to expand. This makes it more difficult if not impossible to achieve respectable levels of human development (Bernal, 2001).

Regarding values, Pinderhughes (1989) compares the values of the American (North American) and Panamanian culture and concludes that Panamanians have a strong value of affiliation in contrast to the North American individualism also in addition to not being as concerned about racism. Ribeiro (2000) enumerate shared community values in Latin America as a sense of belonging, individual and collective rights, solidarity, dialogue, coexistence, tolerance, plurality and collective identity. Williamson (2018) claims that the age and educational level of Panamanians might influence their views of their own position in society and also points out that there is scarce research on this kind of topic with relation to Panamanian society. But, it should be noted that ethical beliefs embedded in a cultural inheritance whose fundamentals lie in family, work, religion and solidarity may help construct a masked expression of discrimination and racism in Panama.

2.3. Ethnicity and cultural identity

Regarding ethnic groups, Arias (2002) states that intense miscegenation has caused the Panamanian population to possess genes from ancestral populations (black, indigenous and white) in different proportions; besides the Asian component (Chinese and Indian). Regarding this mixture of races

and how Panamanians may feel and refer to it, Eleanor Y. Bell (1910) comments:

> [In the Isthmus of Panama, racial complexities are more evident than in any other place of equal size. It is practically impossible to identify the exact inhabitants due to the innumerable permutations of different degrees that exist within this heterogeneous population that hardly recognizes the barriers that distinguish the races.][28]

Panama's cultural identity is also a hybrid mix of many other cultures. The Isthmus of Panama emerged from the sea approximately 2.5 million years ago, connecting North America with South America and dividing the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. As a result, people, animals and species of both continents (north and south) were able to travel through the isthmus. Because of its distinctive geographical location Panama has always been a place of transit for migrations within the continent and now the world. This characteristic affords each region in the country to differences because of the varied influences of other countries.

For example, coastal regions facing the Atlantic Ocean tend to be more Afro-Caribbean with descendants of African slaves from the colonial period and also the slave afro-descendant workers from the railroad and the canal, also called West-Indians. The Azuero region, which faces the Pacific Ocean, is where the Spanish colonial influence was most intense. The Darien region which borders with Colombia is where three different indigenous ethnicities have their reservations. The metro region or Panama City is very metropolitan, multicultural and multiethnic still today (see figure 6 for localization reference).

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[28] Original in Spanish: *"En el Istmo de Panamá se evidencia más que en ningún otro lugar de igual tamaño las complejidades raciales. Se hace prácticamente imposible una identificación exacta de los habitantes debido a las innumerables permutaciones de diferentes grados que existen dentro de esta población tan heterogénea que difícilmente reconoce las barreras que distinguen a las razas."*
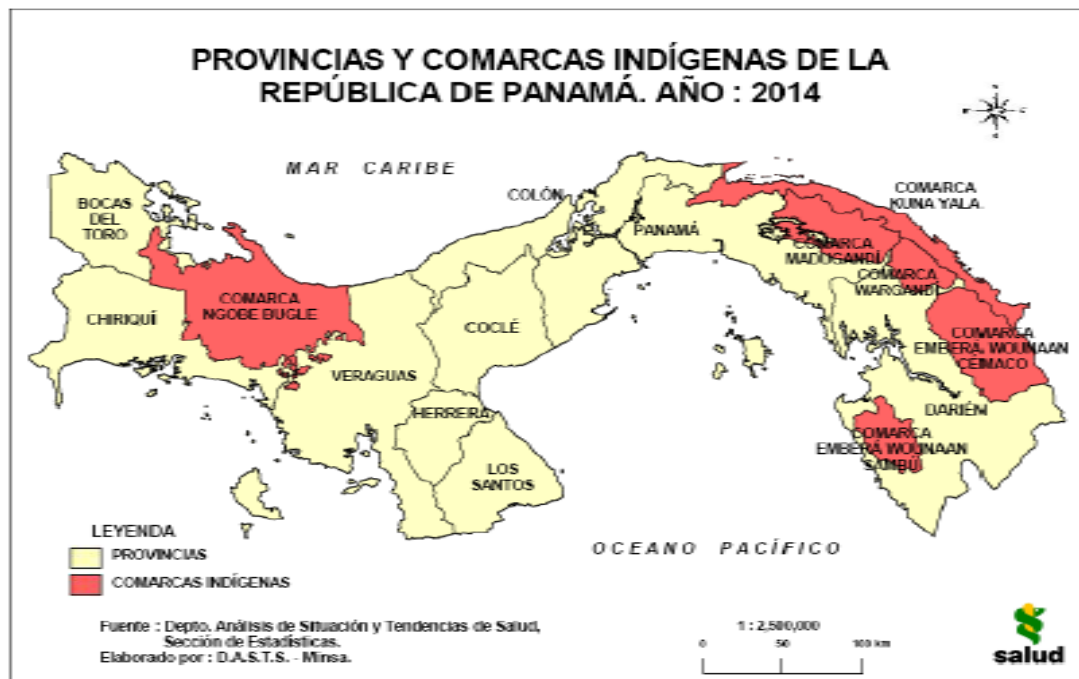
Figure 3. Map of the Republic of Panama. Provinces and indigenous reservations.
Source: Ministerio de Salud, MINSA. (2015)

The light-skinned Panamanians are usually called whites, even if they are mestizos[29]. Blacks are those with dark skin even if they are mestizos; and depending on the region, they may appear to be blacks but are mulatos, a mix of afro-descendants and indigenous or just mestizos. Thus, for Panamanians, it is usual to have a mixed family background (ethnicity), including European, indigenous, Chinese and even Indian and generally people do not get offended when called by race identifiers such as "negro, blanco or indio". Additionally, there are also small Greek and Jewish communities found in the country, which are predominantly merchants. Panamanians are often considered as mixed-race or multiracial[30], although they may look alike afro-descendants, indigenous or white. These mixed-race Panamanians can also be called "mestizos" or "criollos".

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[29] A person of mixed European and American Indian ancestry.

[30] According to Cambridge dictionary, a mixed-race person has parents of different races (= the groups that people are divided into according to their physical characteristics).

Figure 4. Illustration of ethnic diversity in Panama.
Source: UNDP, Local Human Development Atlas (2015)

It is also important to note that after the colonial period, the Panamanian population or the ones that lived in Panama were differentiated by a social class system and categorized according to their ethnic background (race, color and ethnicity). Therefore integration of the population was only allowed according to changes in the socio-economic structure. This dominant driver of integration still prevails today. On this, Stavenhagen (1992) comments:

> "As in the Caribbean, a pervasive color-class continuum continues to exist in Latin America, in which the lighter-skinned population of European descent is at the top of the social structure and the darker-skinned people of indigenous or African descent are to be found at the bottom." (p. 422)

Furthermore, during the railroad and Canal period, immigrants of different nationalities arrived to the isthmus promoting the intersection of different cultures and hierarchies as stated by Donoghue:

> "What made the Zone- Panama borderland especially unique was that it operated in such a rich, cosmopolitan milieu among

the Panamanian, American, Barbadian, Jamaican, Kuna, Chinese, Hindu, Jewish, Arab, and Latin American populations that peopled the Zone, Colon, Panama City, and their environs." (2014:2-3)

The Panamanian identity is also shaped by the diverse languages used in the territory. For example, indigenous can speak their own dialect and also Spanish (Castellano); but those who live in the mountains or in some parts of the countryside will speak Spanish referring to others as "vos".[31] "Vos" is a pronoun from Castellano, which was formerly introduced by the Spanish conquerors, although it is currently not so common in Spain. "The blacks" [los negros], a term commonly used to refer to afro-descendants without any offense, speak Spanish, some of them also English that they learned at school or from their ancestors working at the Canal Zone, Creole English that they learned from their parents and has been passed through generations, and even French learned from their West-Indian ancestors. Street talk also reflects the cultural variety that Panama has as it regularly incorporates foreign words from different languages into daily interactions.

Although classes in Panama may not be differentiated by race or ethnic background but by economic status, as a born and raised Panamanian I must say that, there is still an intrinsic racism in the minds of Panamanians. This way of thinking may not be inspired by hatred but has been planted there by thinking models that have influenced our behavior and have been spread by word of mouth for generations.

2.4.   Education system

With regards to the education system, according to the Political Constitution and the Organic Law No. 47 of Education, formal education in Panama is divided into three levels within which one level is obligatory. It is divided into pre-school and primary/elementary school, secondary/high school, and tertiary/higher education (figure 5).

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[31] *Vos* is a second person singular pronoun for that replaces *tu* [you]. It is a form used mainly in Latin America: Paraguay, Guatemala, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Panama, etc. In Argentina and Uruguay, *vos* has replaced *tú* completely. Vos is not used in Spain anymore.
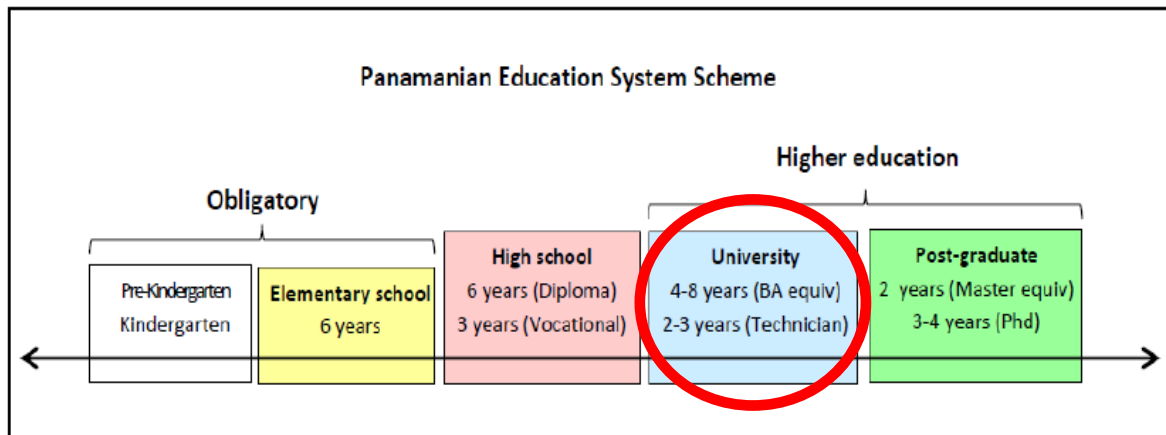
Figure 5. Panamanian Education Scheme. Source: author

Education in Panama is free and obligatory until 15 years of age, and almost all children have access to elementary school and more than half of them attend high school (COSPAE, 2002).

More recently, Freire et al. (2012), in an attempt to analyze and define the Panamanian education situation, classified completed levels of education as: uneducated (0 to 5 years of study), primary or elementary (6 to 8 years of study), basic (9 to 11 years of study), secondary or high school (12 to 15 years of study) and undergraduate and graduate students (16 years of study and over). What's more, Freire et al. (2012) also report using data from 2003 that within Latin-America, Panamanians are privileged - ranking in second place with an average of 11.2 years of schooling, only preceded by Chile, with 11.3 years.

In contrast, The Human Development Report[32], describes Panama with an average of 13.3 years of education as of 2014, a 94.1% adult literacy rate as of 2010, 52% of the population with at least some secondary education (with no change between 2010 and 2014), and a tertiary education gross enrollment rate of 43.5% as of 2012.

2.4.1. Higher Education in Panama

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[32] Human Development Report. http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/PAN

According to Ceville (2003), higher Education in Panama has three defined periods: the Colonial Era (1501-1821), the Time of Union to the Great Colombia (1821-1903), and the Republican Era (1903-2003).

In the Colonial Period, San Agustin Seminary and the College of Panama were created in 1608. These two institutions were the pioneers of higher education in the isthmus. Later in 1749, the Royal and Pontifical University of San Javier was established. These religious groups and convents had the sponsorship of the crown and their primary mission was evangelization. Education was elitist and those from the bourgeois class were the only ones with educational possibilities (Castillo, 2005).

After Panama's independence from Spain and its later union with Colombia, in 1824 the Colegio del Istmo was founded, and in 1841 it changed its category to Universidad del Istmo. At the Time of Union with Gran Colombia, Universidad del Istmo disappeared in 1852 and there is no further record of higher education but only teacher training courses. In the Republican era, the Political Constitution of the Republic set up the legal framework for the creation of secondary and professional education.

According to the Political Constitution of the Republic of Panama, everyone has the right to education and also the responsibility to be educated.[33] In Panama, all students that have completed their high school studies have the right to enter the university. Obviously, each student has to assume the fees for academic services, depending on the institution.

Higher Education or tertiary education objectives are vocational training, specialized training and research, diffusion of the national and universal culture; and the most important, that its alumnae are able to cope with the needs of the fundamental development of the nation. This level of education is provided by public and private universities, as well as by post-secondary (technical and vocational) education centers (Bernal & Torreros, 2012).

The higher education system in Panama is comprised of official universities sponsored with government funds, private universities and also institutions of higher education at technical and/or vocational level which in all offer bachelor degrees and postgraduate studies subsequently classified into specializations, masters and doctorates (Escobar, 2003).

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[33] Constitución Política de la República de Panamá. Año 2004, Artículo 91.

In Panama, the majority of higher education enrollment is found in public universities. The semester fee for the University of Panama (UP) is $27.50. The semester fee for the Technical University of Panama (UTP) varies starting at approximately $30. Private universities tuition varies ranging from $400 to $800 per semester or $120 to $240 per subject. The state budget to public universities and support to students in the form of loans and scholarships has decreased over the years, although the percentage of the student population enrolled at university level by 1974 was 4.7%, in 1995 was 10.67% and in 1999 was 13.82, showing increasing levels of enrollment over time (Rodriguez, 2002).

Statistics also show that from the total of enrollments each year, approximately 80% of the students belong to official universities (Bernal, 2010), where 7 out of 10 graduates are women (table 5) (Bernal & Torreros, 2012). According to SIEGPA[34], in 2010, a total of 390,474 had completed university studies. From these, 58% were women and 42% men.

Year	Students registered	Women	Men
2004	128,863	66,792	40,703
2005	128,075	64,807	40,311
2006	130,838	79,709	51,129
2007	132,660	80,373	52,287
2008	134,054	80,179	54,111
2009	135,181	80,605	54,604
2010	136,879	83,077	56,039
2011	133,497	80,131	53,366
2012	140,303		
2013	124,375		
2014	142,725		
2015	156,635		
2016	152,219		
2017	168,335		

Table 5. University students registered in official and private universities in the Republic of Panama by year and gender. Source: Contraloria General de la Republica de Panama (INEC, 2013), Sistema de Indicadores con Enfoque de Género de Panamá (SIEGPA, 2018)

The other 20% of students, the ones who attend private universities, benefit from their curricular oriented offers toward careers considered to be of low economic risk such as law, social sciences, business administration and education sciences. Only a couple of these private institutions offer careers such as dentistry and medicine but at exorbitant prices that only the privileged can afford. With this, private universities left

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[34] Sistema de Indicadores con Enfoque de Género en Panamá.

engineering and natural sciences related careers unattended as well as specialized research on these subjects (Escobar, 2003). In contrast, I was not able to find information about dropouts in any form. However, these graduation numbers can also be compared with registration numbers that clearly show that the amount of students registered by sex is proportional to differences in female and male graduated students (table 6).

Year	Graduated	Women	Men
2006	19,679	13,161	6,518
2007	20,182	13,438	6,744
2008	21,061	13,907	7,154
2009	21,706	14,293	7,413
2010	21,821	14,043	7,778
2011	22,172	14,103	8,069
2012	22,786	14,227	8,559
2013	23,752	15,371	8,381
2014	26,721	17,644	9,077

Table 6. University students graduated per year and gender from University of Panama.
Source: Sistema de Indicadores con Enfoque de Género de Panamá (SIEGPA, 2018)

According to Bernal (2001), attending higher education or going to university[35] was only affordable for 31% of the non-poor (urban dwellers), 3% of the poor (rural dwellers) and 1% of the extremely poor (indigenous people). It should also be mentioned that a contrasting but important attribute of Panama's higher education system is that there is a wide-range of infrastructure covering the country with regional centers in all its provinces. Public institutions have regional centers and also teaching extensions in most provinces which eases access for rural, medium and low income university students throughout the territory.

On another note, accessibility is not the only issue regarding the Panamanian higher education system. According to Escobar (2005), authorities such as vice-rectors, deans of faculties and directors of admission departments at official institutions are also concerned about the discrepancy between the academic offer versus the changing labor market demand[36] plus the levels of dropouts and repetition in higher education.

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[35] According to Bernal (2001), population between 18 and 24 years old.

[36] *Estudio De Oferta Y Demanda* en Los *Centros Regionales Universitarios y Extensiones Docentes.* 2008. Dirección General De Planificación Universitaria, Universidad De Panamá.

These authorities are beginning to study the factors that influence the dropout and repetition processes and their effects at the tertiary level. They recognize that the dropout and repetition phenomena at universities are not only related to academic and economic matters but also the existence of other social problems that have not yet been studied.

In addition, one of the most important struggles that the higher education system has is the lack of connection with the productive sectors' requirements, the state needs, and what the society really demands. These varied lists of career pathways provided by universities do not respond to the priorities for the country's development, as they are recurrent in almost all universities; a situation that highlights the lack of evaluation the education authorities give to the issue. Also worth noting is the poor relevance and connection of curricular contents to professional life, business practices and how society actually runs (Castillo & Arrue, 2003).

Another important issue is that some universities show more interest in student quality and performance while others pay more attention to the number of registered students (Ramírez & Corvo, 2007), regardless of being a public or a private institution. The conflict between quality and quantity in this sense does not support the achievement of common education goals.

2.4.2. Development of education in the political moment 2001-2010

The general concern about dropout in education is not new in Panama. Certainly, over the years, the different ruling governments have had multiple approaches to it. In 2015, a report by national authorities was prepared in order to align with the World Forum of Education that same year. It was presented with the aim of assessing the progress made since the year 2000 in achieving the "Education for All" (EFA) goals[37]. In this report, it is described the commitment of the nation to the EFA, a summary of the National Strategy, policy, and plans and objectives for education for the years 2000 to 2014; which includes alliances challenges and goals for the year 2015.

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[37] Education for All (EFA) is a global movement led by UNESCO (United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), aiming to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015.

Within this summary, important topics such as early childhood care and education universal elementary or basic education, and the learning needs of young people and adults are addressed. Goals are pondered as improving the level of adult literacy, parity and gender equality in education, and quality of education in general. However, as the government changes every five years because of presidential elections, not all attempts to enhance education have a satisfactory end. After many years of not being connected to worldwide educational standards, the new millennium brought in new aims of educational development.

For a general background of the politics of the ruling governments before the year 2000 and their attempts to boost and redefine educational development in the country, it must be said that at the beginning of the 1990's Panama was immersed in a high degree of insecurity, disbelief and political resentment after the socio-economic crisis of the late 1980's (Focus Economics, 2017). There was a constant questioning of the legitimacy of the 1989 elections and the subsequent North American invasion. Additionally, international organizations had no confidence in government institutions and future electoral practices.

This situation led to incoming governments engaging in searches for new forms of understanding with private and public workers, and the concern towards the emerging challenges that international economies, political changes and technological tendencies demanded; education and technology being on the list. Therefore, several negotiations between the government and workers were held in order to increase the country's economy as a first step to engage future development.

According to a UNDP achievement assessment report (2000), there was a first negotiation attempt in 1990. This attempt did not go very far because the ruling government refused to participate. Later, the second attempt arose out of a series of meetings and conferences directed at informing business people about the demands of the international economy, although this also failed. The third attempt, in 1994, was influenced by different views of the electoral process encouraged by the Inter-Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Church. This attempt promoted the approval of the Electoral Ethical Pact by all political parties.[38]

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[38] Information obtained from a UNDP report, presumably from 2000.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), presided further meetings as a neutral body in order to ease the dialogue process and increase public debate on state issues. With this support, civil society, the government and the private sector could talk within a neutral environment and with transparent process. Within this environment, the Panama 2000 Meetings (1996)[39] and the concerted development of the National Vision 2020[40] were peacefully held. All of these talks were held during a time of expectancy for the future transfer of the canal based on the Torrijos-Carter Treaty[41], as well as all US military bases and civilian assets to the Panamanian government in December 31, 1999.

After this set of circumstances and agreements, the incoming governments had many different issues to resolve regarding other topics beyond governance and elections. One of these issues was the development and redirection of education in general.

It is at the beginning of the new century when economy started to grow as show in figure 6. During this period of time (2001-2010), three different presidents ruled the country. Each of their ruling periods had particular impacts on the education sector.

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[39] The Panama 2000 Meetings were dialogues between civil society and the government. The focus was on issues such as the environment and social problems, gender and labor. The first and only meeting sought to legitimize the reasons and administration for the reversion of the Panama Canal and establish the use of its revenues in the promotion of national development. Also, the meetings sought to guarantee the rights and working conditions of the employees and to increase the participation of women in all levels of management of the canal. Political parties, the national government and fourteen representatives from civil society participated.

[40] The set of social cooperation and negotiation processes, which started in Panama in 1993 and concluded in May of 1998 in a historical document entitled "National Vision 2020", which describes the common needs of the country by 2020, intended to be fulfilled by then.

[41] The U.S. Senate ratified the Torrijos-Carter Treaty in 1978. This treaty gave the nation of Panama eventual control of the Panama Canal and the Canal Zone.
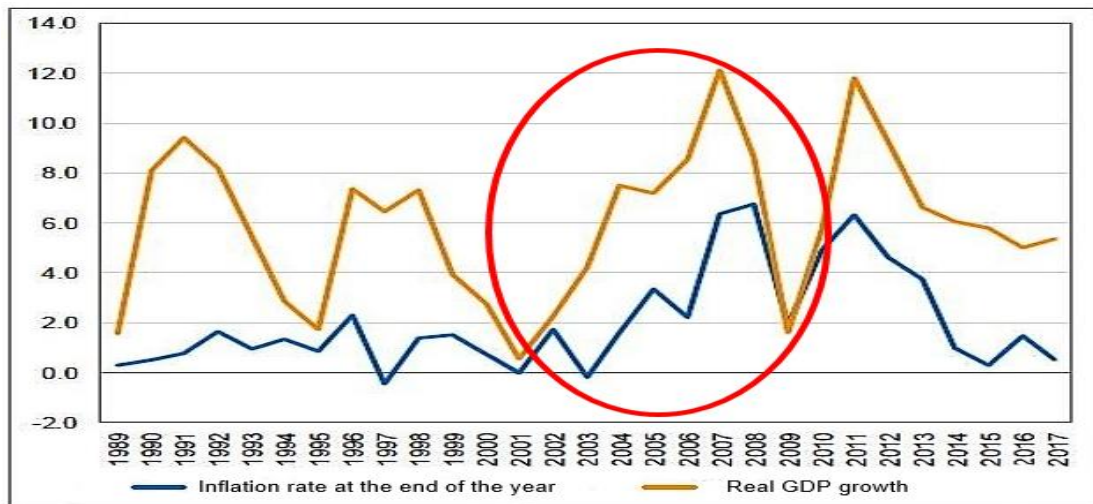
Figure 6: Inflacion y distribucion del ingreso en Panama.
Source: International Monetary Fund. Nota Tecnica IDB-TN-1631

From 1999 to 2004, Mireya Moscoso Rodriguez was the elected president, the first and only female to hold this position in Panama. Moscoso Rodriguez pledged to lead a different economic policy than that of her predecessor, president Perez Balladares (1994-1999) who was known as privatizing government agencies. As an alternative to the previous neo-liberal policy which rigorously punished the employment, education and micro-business sectors, Moscoso Rodriguez also promised to respect the worker and protect industry achievements. Moscoso Rodriguez also assured teachers the evaluation of the special pensions program[42] that had been cut off from the education sector (Gandaseui, 1999).

In 2001, Panama allocated about 6% of GDP to the education sector as part of one of the largest per capita budgets in Latin America. Nevertheless, most of the budget was assigned for operations, common for Ministries of Education, which tend to be institutions of unstructured growth and loaded with many functions. Additionally, their budgets and volume of personnel were managed with a performance criteria below the performance criteria applied to those who belong to private corporations (Mosquera & Shacalo, 2001).

During Moscoso Rodriguez's mandate, several dialogues and conversations with different associations in the education sector were held. For example, The National Forums of Panamanian Education were held by the Legislative Assembly in 2001 and the Dialogues for the Integral Transformation of the National Educational System were conducted by UNDP in 2002. From these,

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[42] Self-financed retirement plan for educators of the Ministry of Education.

the "National Dialogue for Integral Transformation of the Educational System" arose. Here, the UNDP and other national sectors also participated in these dialogues. The dialogues started in 2003 and led to several laws being passed. For instance, in 2003, Law No. 2 established the compulsory teaching of the English language in official and private educational centers as well as in first and second levels of education (elementary to high school) with the aim of contributing to the modernization of the Panamanian education system as a whole.[43]

By this time, there was already some progress in terms of achievement of national education coverage (95% literacy as of year 2000 and also the approval of a law that made English a compulsory subject in public and private schools). Moreover, according to Social Watch[44], the amount of government funding for education and related services in Panama is one of the largest in the Central American region. According to diagnostics made under the Plan-Puebla Panama[45], Panama is also the country with the highest degree of literacy (91% of the population) in Central America.

During Moscoso's period, there was a strong perception that school conditions in the urban and rural areas were good. This perception was far from reality, partly because 95% of the subsidies allocated during this period were given to higher education, only benefiting the 5% of poor students in the country attending school. Furthermore, urban areas received far more attention than rural areas, contributing to a better integration and social mobilization of urban students than students of the rural and indigenous areas (UNDP, 2002).[46]

Nevertheless, regardless of all these advancements, the National Human Development Report of 2002 (UNDP, 2002) states that education had become another source of inequality in Panama. This was manifested

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[43] Asamblea Legislativa, Gaceta Oficial del 14 de enero de 2003.

[44] Social Watch is an international network of citizens' organizations in the struggle to eradicate poverty and the causes of poverty, to end all forms of discrimination and racism, to ensure an equitable distribution of wealth and the realization of human rights. http://www.socialwatch.org/node/63

[45] Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) is defined as a sustainable and integral development project, created and proposed by Mexican President Vicente Fox. It is directed to the southern states of Mexico and the Central American countries. It proposes to relaunch Mexico-Central America cooperation, consolidating the commercial opening scheme, managing resources for infrastructure works of common interest, and strengthening and expanding institutional mechanisms for concerted policies.

[46] Informe Nacional de Desarrollo Humano.

through poor opportunities for access to education and limited successful completion, reinforcing poverty levels and social inequality.

During Moscoso's ruling period, the government made decisions concerning monetary administration of education services leading to a better participation of different political parties, organized civil society, businesspeople, and companies in collective initiatives (i.e., the Dialogue for Integral Transformation of Education System[47] and the Dialogue of the Program for the Promotion of Educational Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean).[48]

With regard to higher education, a consistent increment of female enrollment occurred between the years 1990 and 2000, creating a considerable gap between men and women within tertiary education. Today the trend continues as evidenced by figures from the University of Panama.[49]

According to CIDOB[50], by the end of her ruling period, Moscoso's presidency and government was notorious worldwide due to allegations of causing higher rates of unemployment (around 14%) as well as corruption and crime being driven by local and international drug trafficking. Other points of notoriety include accusations regarding transparency matters in public affairs management, moral values, problems regarding the decentralization of the government administration and indigenous minority and women in society (Ortiz de Zarate, 2016).

- **From 2004 to 2009** Martin Torrijos Espino was the elected president. Torrijos Espino committed himself during the elections period to the fulfilment of a set of key infrastructure investment projects which were vital to the economic development of Panama. These were crucial given that Panama was a country that, after the last government, had allocated most of its GDP to the services sector with projects that were never completed because of a lack of financing and technical analyses. One example is the fulfillment of the idea of canal expansion (e.g. adding a third set of locks)

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[47] Diálogo para la Transformación Integral del Sistema Educativo, 2002

[48] Mesa de Diálogo del Programa de Promoción de la Reforma Educativa en América Latina y el Caribe (PREAL)

[49] Information obtained from CEPAL (Comision Economica para America Latina y el Caribe)

[50] Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.

in order to cope with the constant growth of the naval industry and new ship sizes in order to supply the demands of the former canal users (Ortiz de Zarate, 2016).

Regarding the education sector, several former laws were adopted to ensure greater institutionality and recognition among adult education approaches. One of these was Law 34 of July 6, 1995 which created a normative framework regarding youth and adult education within the Panamanian educational system. This legal provision created a non-standard structure of education; and later, a strategy for the implementation of the subsystem it supports in the framework of the "Ten-year education strategy 1995-2006".[51] This strategy continued its development until 2006 and lasted the duration of Torrijos Espino's ruling period.

Within this law, Torrijos Espino promoted the creation of the National Youth and Adults Office. This office is tasked with developing objectives, policies and strategies to ensure quality education for the population over fifteen years of age and particularly those who have not had the opportunity to continue or complete their studies in the regular system. The office has the objectives of promoting the relevance, equity and quality of learning services for young people and adults as well as meeting the growing demands of learners in their own contexts.

Efforts to meet these objectives led to several courses offered in a night shift modality as a first level of basic general education, secondary education, and higher education (Post-Media, University and Non-University) for Youth and Adults. A national report[52] on these courses also states that the main challenge of Panamanian society in the area of education of youth and adults is the lack of intellectual capacities of a significant segment of the population. The report stated that there was a 7.6% rate of absolute illiteracy and functional illiteracy characterized by loss of skills such as basic reading, writing, mathematics and effective participation in social activities that require the use of these competencies.

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[51] This strategy consisted in a Non-Regular Teaching Subsystem that is basically oriented towards the Care of children, young people and adults not included in the Regular Subsystem and it is also offered through formal and non-formal modalities.

[52] Smith Lange, 2008. El desarrollo y el estado de la cuestión sobre el Aprendizaje y la educación de adultos (AEA). Informe nacional de Panamá.

Torrijos' government also established a new institution for training and human development called INADEH[53]. The purpose of this institution is to promote, establish and maintain a national educational system that guarantees the vocational training of human resources in productive occupations required by the national development process, considering ethical and moral values and skills. Thus they focused on training people in order to meet the growing human resources demand of the country, such as the expansion of the Panama Canal (with a plan for a third set of locks), public infrastructure, the private construction industry itself, ports, the banking sector, the agricultural sector, exports, and the tourism sector.

The report by Smith Lange (2008) also states that more than 292,000 young Panamanians benefited from this educational offer with the advantage of fast insertion mechanisms into the labor market. Therefore, INADEH became the largest vocational institution with the largest budget in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2008 (Smith Lange, 2008). Within the strategic plan developed by the Ministry of Education in this governmental period, great importance was given to the policy of quality and modernization of learning at all levels and new modalities of the education system.

- **From 2009 to 2014** Ricardo Martinelli Berrocal was the elected president. President Martinelli Berrocal assumed power in 2009 confronting a strong economic crisis that affected the US and therefore all countries that used the US Dollar[54] as a common currency. Although this economic crisis affected the whole American continent, megaprojects such as port activities, leading import/export movements in the region, and the expansion of the Panama Canal continued their progress. Other activities such as real estate and banking sector growth also continued but at a moderate pace. With these came some negative effects such as money laundering and international drug trafficking along the territory, causing an in crime rates and rising sense of insecurity among the country's population (Gandasegui, 2010).

Regarding the social sector, there was a rise in unemployment and informal economic activities. The agriculture sector lowered its production rates,

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[53] INADEH, Instituto Nacional de Formacion Profesional y Capacitacion para el Desarrollo Humano.

[54] Panama adopted the US Dollar as legal tender in 1904 in basis of an agreement with the United States, which is still in force. http://www.iadb.org/res/publications/pubfiles/pubS-127.pdf

performance dropped in the manufacturing sector, and the education and health sector suffered as well (Gandasegui, 2010).

As a consequence, President Martinelli Berrocal granted several state subsidies for the population (aimed at those with incomes below the poverty line) such as the Opportunities Network, the "100 for the 70's", the Universal Scholarship and the Guardian Angel. These subsidies granted a $100 bonus for people over 70 years of age who had no access to social security services, monthly stipends for children attending school, and benefits for disabled people in extreme poverty, respectively (Gomez Torrijos, 2014).

According to the Center for Social Training (CCS, Centro de Capacitacion Social)[55], in 2010 at the moment president Martinelli took the chair citizen insecurity had become one of the main problems among the Panamanian population, exacerbated by a great failure in the justice system. Moreover, the CSS enumerated issues such as school dropouts, social exclusion, lack of job placements and the absence of political participation among the younger population, arguing that these factors drove youth and people of working age to participate in gangs throughout the country (Gandasegui, 2010).

These issues among the population not only affected the common Panamanian but also the eight autochthonous ethnic groups (indigenous) found throughout the country. The most noticeable of the issues affecting these ethnic groups were extreme poverty, illiteracy, racial and social discrimination, unemployment, lack of state security (police), and misguided ideas regarding how the authorities should approach these groups (Endara, 2009).

In 2011, The President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Panamanian Minister of Economy and Finance endorsed a $30,000,000 loan agreement to build a program to improve the access and quality of education in the largest indigenous reservations, where a large school population was willing to be enrolled (Emberá-Wounaan, Ngäbe, Buglé and Kuna Yala).This program consisted of building three "center" schools that provided services to the reservations as a network that would include education from middle school up to high school. The program also intended

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[55] Center for Social Training (CCS, Centro de Capacitacion Social) is an organization dedicated to the denunciation, defense and education of human rights in Panama.

to enhance the learning of the Spanish language as well as implement the use of local dialects in daily teaching, mathematics in preschool and the first three years of elementary school. With the last disbursement in 2011, Panama became one of the Latin American countries that most invested in education per GDP (BID, 2011).

With regards to enhancing indigenous educational challenges, in 1998[56], the Technical Coordination Unit for the Execution of the Special Programs in the Indigenous Areas was created. But it was in August 2007 that the National Bureau of Bilingual Intercultural Education (DNEIB)[57] was created to ensure that culturally differentiated people develop a quality education with equity, eliminating exclusion and marginality through a process of intercultural education. DNEIB's objective is also to guarantee the active participation and representation of the different Panamanian indigenous in the process of institutionalizing bilingual intercultural education and raising the schooling levels in the different reservations while improving access, retention and school performance.

In December 2008, intercultural bilingual education was implemented and developed in Panamanian indigenous communities, with special emphasis on the teaching of reading and writing of the mother tongue and spirituality of Panamanian aboriginals. In November 2010[58], indigenous languages and alphabets were recognized and rules for intercultural bilingual education were established in order to develop quality education with equity, eliminating exclusion and marginality through a process of intercultural education, to facilitate preservation and respect of the Panamanian indigenous identity and cultural heritage.

There were many efforts during these three presidential periods aimed at enhancing education in general. This is indicative of the continued struggles in the education system in Panama despite prior efforts. However, it is a fact that every year the country's annual education budget experiences shortages, with higher education also suffering from financial pressure.

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[56] MEDUCA. http://www.meduca.gob.pa/intercultural-bilingue/quienes

[57] Decreto Ejecutivo 274 de 31 de agosto de 2007, que crea la Dirección Nacional de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe (DNEIB) y se le asignan Funciones. Retrieved on February 27, 2019 from: http://www.axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/amsudant/panama-decret-94-2007.htm

[58] Constitución de la Republica de Panama, el Artículo 11 de la ley 47 de 1946, Orgánica de Educación y la Ley 88 del 22 de noviembre de 2010.

3. CHAPTER   Literature Review

Many researchers have tried to explain the dropout phenomenon, its implications, and other aspects of it. Literature on this subject has been focused on multiple approaches such as the sociological, educational, psychological and even economic approach to the dropout phenomenon (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975; Bean, 1980). These theories mostly try to explain and elaborate on systems and processes in order to describe this event and its reasons; as well as students' social engagement and further development.

With this in mind, this section will present relevant authors and their theories, especially highlighting their particular focal points on understanding dropouts and its multiple causes, and the socio-cultural involvement attached to this phenomenon. I also include a conceptual framework that will serve as a guiding principle to the understanding of this study. Therefore, this literature review will provide a linkage between the theories and the present study while delivering some background relevant to the topic.

3.1.   Relevant theories on dropout

Sociological models tend to emphasize the influence that external factors have on the dropout phenomenon. To start, in an attempt to expose the phenomenon of university students dropping out, Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) proposed their theoretical models of college withdrawal or student attrition based on Durkheim's (1951) thoughts on suicide. Both sociologists elaborated their models, basing it on a psychological model with the aim of explaining that the dropout phenomenon does not have only psychological implications, but social ones as well. Therefore, their models explain how students were integrated into the social college environment. They measured this by establishing variables of dropouts' personal satisfaction with their peers and their interaction with faculty members outside the class; plus the impact these interactions had in their study achievements and institutions (Brown & Steinberg, 1991; Carpenter & Hayden, 1990).

Based on the social psychological suicide model from Durkheim (1951)[59], Spady (1970) claims that the dropout phenomenon is as a consequence of

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[59] Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim, also known as the "Father of Sociology", attempted to develop a sociological explanation of variations in social suicide rates among Catholics and Protestants in his work, Suicide: A Study in Sociology, 1897.

the poor integration of individuals into the higher education environment. Durkheim's theory of suicide suggests that suicidal behavior strikes when an individual feels that he has failed the social system because of not capable of integrating into society.

In Spady's parallel sociological point of view of academic dropouts, this poor integration issue touches on all the expectations and demands required or inquired by the individual's family and the challenges this individual faces to cope with these demands. This then has a strong effect on the individual's social integration at university and therefore forces the student to drop out. Moreover, Spady states that it also affects the individual's regular academic performance, intellectual development and the successful opportunities to integrate with their peers.

Later, Tinto (1975) assures that students act according to the "Theory of Social Exchange".[60] Focusing on dropouts, this theory states that students work on building their social and academic integration; meaning that if they weigh the benefits of staying in college above those of the personal costs it requires, this may result in a positive perception and lead to remaining in the institution. On the other hand, if their perception is the contrary, meaning that their personal activities are perceived as more rewarding, there is a tendency to drop out.

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[60] Social Exchange Theory (SET) studies the social behavior in the interaction of two sides that implement a cost-benefit analysis to determine risks and benefits. The most comprehensive social exchange theories are those from the psychologists John W. Thibaut and Harold H. Kelley, the sociologists George Homans, Peter Blau, Richard Marc Emerson, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Later, Ivan Nye contributed with twelve theoretical propositions that aid in understanding the exchange theory. 1. Individuals choose those alternatives from which they expect the most profit. 2. Cost being equal, they choose alternatives from which they anticipate the greatest rewards. 3. Rewards being equal, they choose alternatives from which they anticipate the fewest costs. 4. Immediate outcomes being equal, they choose those alternatives that promise better long- term outcomes. 5. Long-term outcomes being perceived as equal, they choose alternatives providing better immediate outcomes. 6. Costs and other rewards being equal, individuals choose the alternatives that supply or can be expected to supply the most social approval. 7. Costs and other rewards being equal, individuals choose statuses and relationships that provide the most autonomy. 8. Other rewards and costs equal, individuals choose alternatives characterized by the least ambiguity in terms of expected future events and outcomes. 9. Other costs and rewards equal, they choose alternatives that offer the most security for them. 10. Other rewards and costs equal, they choose to associate with, marry, and form other relationships with those whose values and opinions generally are in agreement with their own and reject or avoid those with whom they chronically disagree. 11. Other rewards and costs equal, they are more likely to associate with the sum of abilities, performances, characteristics, and statuses that determine one's desirability in the social marketplace and form other relationships with their equals, than those above or below them. 12. In industrial societies, other costs and rewards equal, individuals choose alternatives that promise the greatest financial gains for the least financial expenditures.

Overall, his sociological scope elaborates on the importance of student's social and academic integration in higher education life. At the same time, Tinto's theory claims that the student tries to avoid behaviors that can bring him any kind of rewards in the form of relationships and interactions; being that these may be rewards related to the socioeconomic and cultural level of the family and values, personal attributes, and previous academic experiences. Contrastingly, Tinto's position lacks explanation on how organizational aspects of the individual and institutions can eventually have an influence on their decision making. However, the introduction of Social Exchange Theory opens a new view to the dropout phenomenon, now putting all the blame on the student and the way they weigh their interest when making the decision to drop out.

After these authors, numerous other authors explored dropout tackling economic, institutional, social and cultural aspects. This brings new thoughts and scopes on the subject and also other theories in an attempt to explain processes, mechanisms, and tools that influence student retention. Some other authors relevant to mystudy contributing to different emphases are Bean (1980), Pascarella (1985), Natriello (1987), Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora & Hengstler (1992), Leppel (1993), Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997), Rumberger (2001), Crozier, Reay, Clayton & Colliander (2007), Diaz Peralta (2008) and The Agence de la Santé et des Services Sociaux de Montréal (2008). To list the contributing factors associated with student dropouts elicited by these authors, I will describe themin chronological order.

Bean (1980), argues that beliefs influence attitudes and that students act on behavioral intentions, external factors, family approval, encouragement of friends, and finances, which may lead to drop out from their studies. In 1981, he presented "The Casual Model for Student Attrition", where he considers ten different variables. These variables exclude the ones relevant to the background of the individual and are thus related to a single subject in a single institution and suggest a failure of their socialization. These variables are: intent to leave, practical value, grades and educational goals, job certainty, family institution approval, choice and opportunity to transfer, courses and loyalty.

With a different scope, Pascarella (1985) suggests a model concentrating on institutional and environmental characteristics. He argues that a student's development and exchange is based on five groups of variables, from which two are, once again, generally associated with personal

characteristics and cultural background. These characteristics are skills, performance, personality, aspirations and ethnicity.

Natriello (1987) explains the different responses of students at risk and actions that should be considered in order to prevent students from dropping out. He infers a need for programs and smaller sized institutions, the individualization of the curricula and implementation of new institutional strategies, and the constant dependability of the student with cultural and community conditions. Natriello claims that there is a reciprocal relationship between the institutional processes and the student's characteristics associated with their dropout. He also identifies students with economic disadvantages to be more likely to drop out.

Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora & Hengstler (1992) integrate models into arguments from Tinto and Bean. Particularly relevant are the influence that parents and friends have on a student's withdrawal and the financial help that the student receives from parents. Contrastingly, Leppel (1993) implies that university enrollments and therefore dropouts are influenced by distances and the student's previous academic record.

Braxton et al. (1997), following the former theories and in an attempt to enumerate factors comprehended in this phenomenon, propose five major theoretical models (psychological, sociological, economic, organizational and interactionist) to classify dropout reasons in accordance with the emphasis assigned to three key explanatory variables - personal, familiar and institutional. These variables' organizational approach suggests that whether or not a student drops out is dependent on the characteristics of the institution. More specifically, aspects such as the quality of teachers, the classroom experience, infrastructure (including institutional variables) as well as health, cultural activities, and books and the influence the authors have on the readers.

Rumberger (2001) developed two frameworks to understand the complex phenomenon of dropouts. The first framework is focused on the institutional viewpoint of the factors related to the student's family, school, community and peers. The second framework focus on individual factors related to dropout. With the combined use of these two frameworks, Rumberger tries to clarify the differences found in dropout rates among social groups with respect to race and minorities. These frameworks have been merely used to predict risk factors in high school dropouts.

Crozier et al. (2007) claim that social and cultural experiences that university students have at their educational institution make them confront their own differences, both in the university and at home. Therefore, deconstructing and reconstructing their identity. Some students distance themselves from their old selves, but most of them seek to manage multiple or hybrid versions of themselves. There are also particular ethnic and gender dimensions contemplated by the authors in this regard.

After that, Diaz Peralta (2008) provided a conceptual model of the dynamic balance of student retention/attrition at university including academic, social, and institutional factors in order to demonstrate that the student must adapt to life factors and changes. Making the study on dropouts more comprehensive, as it also tackles personal and cultural variables, Diaz Peralta proposed dropout predictors such as academic integration, social integration, socioeconomic status, gender, race equality, and grade point average.

Finally, The Agence de la Santé et des Services Sociaux de Montréal[61] (2008), a social services agency, concludes in its studies that children are influenced by their peers and also have the propensity to imitate the characteristics of the neighborhood they belong to. That is, children and adolescents who live in the same community are more likely to assume the common behavior of their circle, no matter whether the behavior is positive or negative; with this element being clearly related to social-cultural and socio-economic environment variables. Moreover, disadvantaged underdeveloped communities, rural areas, and areas with a high incidence of immigration have a tendency of having an effect in general education dropout.

Among university dropout theories, there are predominant variables that show social characteristics such as family and the community environment, as well as cultural characteristics such as family background and social integration. Arguments on cultural capital, racial conflicts, family and the feeling of dissatisfaction when goals are not accomplished are also addressed (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992). This study lists all variables related to dropout as elicited by the study participants. However, it also attempts to consider social and cultural variables present

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[61] The Agency is established to perform the functions necessary for the coordination and implementation of health and social services in its region, particularly in terms of funding, human resources allocation and specialized services. The mission of the Agency is to ensure the governance of the health and social services network of the Montréal region in order to improve its performance and thereby contribute to the improvement of health and well-being of the population.

in the daily life interactions within the participant's community in order to identify socio-cultural practices that may be connected to the dropout decision.

3.2.   University Dropouts in Latin America

Over the years, scholars and institutions in Latin America have been collecting and analyzing data about university dropouts and its causes and effects. These studies are part of the state of the art on dropouts in Latin America and provide a varied perspective for dropout analysis while mentioning socioeconomic, academic, individual, institutional and environmental factors. To illustrate this, I selected several Latin American studies on university student dropout and their conclusions.

Romo & Fresan (2001), from ANUIES[62] in Mexico, state that there are a lot of freshmen[63] that have difficulties integrating into the academic and social environment that involves being a university student. They also state that the inability the student has to recognize the demands of the academic system and the need for more mature behavior is also a hurdle for the student. This perspective is also supported by Rios & Pineda (2014) from Guatemala, as they claim that immaturity is a factor that induces early university career dropouts.

Abarca & Sanchez (2005) conducted research about the reasons students from the University of Costa Rica drop out. Their study concluded that students drop out because course studies differ from what was offered in the academic curriculum and not economic factors as was previously thought. This situation also gave the students the opportunity to opt for other careers and continue with their studies until the end.

In Colombia, Vivas (2005) states that as complex as the dropout issue is given all its factors, the student profile and his previous high school experiences connected to social factors plus the inexperience regarding the university environment performs a great deal in his dropout from studies. And, the environment is related to the differences between the two levels of education (secondary school vs. university) such as the level of responsibility and requirements; as well as learning and teaching styles.

On the other hand, Giron & Gonzalez (2005), also from Colombia, found in their study that there is a strong connection between students' lack of

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[62]   Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior, México.

[63]   A first year undergraduate.

academic performance and dropping out. This academic performance is affected by limited family support and deficient guidance on course selection, which in the end produces a lack of motivation for study completion and accomplishment levels.

Rivera Rearte, Roca, Echart, Alfaro, López, Farfán & Mercado (2006) conclude that the bottom line of the dropout phenomena are economic matters. They explain that in Bolivia, because of the economic situation, students prefer to seek employment. Later, these students cannot cope with academic matters. Also, they attribute importance to career selection and forming a new family as decisive factors at the time of dropout. Regarding the influence of starting a family, Moreno Torres, Colin & Sanchez (2013), Mexican authors, argue that pregnancies in female university students are a cause of dropout. This research has its roots in social and cultural aspects and emphasizes that pregnancy should not be seen as an obstacle in life. The authors also agree on the difficulties that male students have with a pregnancy in the family as they will need to assume parental responsibilities.

Rojas & Gonzalez (2008), from Colombia, believe that dropout rates increased because of the then financial crisis, due to students registering to university at an early age, and a lack of vocational guidance; the latter of which is supported by Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora (1996). In the definition used for their study, Rojas & Gonzalez suggest that dropping out is as the dissolution of the student-institution link that has a serious effect on both parties. Also, they infer that in order to come up with better strategies to confront high dropout rates there should be a more active approach than only studies about it. Giron & Gonzales (2005) add that these studies are not focused on the student's assumptions about university life.

From another point of view, Mori Sanchez (2012), from Peru, states that the dropout phenomenon depends on a perspectives problem. Her study was performed in a private university where 50% of the students regularly dropped out from their studies in the first or second semester. The study showed that economic issues were the least influential of the factors, while institutional and personal factors the most relevant.

The compilation of these works provides a varied sample of elements discussed in studies about dropouts. However, variables in the presented works, focal points and assumptions only become part of a broad ongoing body of research that grows with time. This short compilation of works was

intended to provide an overview of the current research on the dropout phenomenon in Latin America as a starting point for the present study.

3.3. Factors associated with dropout

There is a great variety of factors associated with dropout such as economic, institutional, social and cultural factors. However, as this research provides a stronger focus on the socio-cultural factors involved in the dropout decision process, I will provide literature on five factors that are not included in the previously discussed studies that could also be associated with university dropout. These factors refer to achievement with relation to the student's socio-cultural environment, the media and its influence on student's decision making, the socio-cultural impact of gender roles, generations and its different interests, and student mobility and safety.

3.3.1. Achievement and socio-cultural environment

Inequalities that produce success and future changes in behavior become part of a never-ending process on how society thinks lived achievements are accomplished. The concept of achievement is related to socio-cultural practices that influence the dropout decision. Throughout an individual's life, there are certain events that, among the people surrounding the individual, are considered achievements. Certainly, these events categorized as achievements are different depending on the socio-cultural environment in which the individual lives. This situation also applies when a high school student graduates and closes the adolescent-school cycle and starts with his adult-university life.

On this matter, Coleman (1966) states that there are inequalities that are imposed on children by the environment in which they are raised (i.e. neighborhood, peers) and that these inequalities will be carried along through their adult life. For example, as adolescent students pursuing academic achievement, they will be obliged to confront these inequalities as adults at the end of their school life. Moreover, with regard to inequalities as a means of future achievement in life, White (1982) claims that socio-economic status as an inequality among students is a self-evident factor which has been pointed out as coadjutant to personal achievement for

years by educators and scholars such as Boocock (1972), Charters (1963), and Welch (1974).

From Bordieu's (1998) point of view, families are defined as corporate bodies with a tendency to perpetuate their social being by using reproduction strategies, including educational strategies. These educational strategies refer to cultural capital[64] as much as financial capital. The idea that status can be perpetuated by helping and investing in education emerges. Bordieu also makes emphasis that the interest in this reproducing model of the distribution of cultural capital within the structure of social space increases in families and especially the economically privileged ones. Thus, the greater the family's cultural capital is, the higher the achievement.

A current focus on this is how society gathers what is seen as capitals and means from individuals who involve themselves in activities that later will benefit the greater society (Carr & Hendricks, 2011). Therefore, social capital[65] is also counted as a great resource for any societal achievement; achievement being the highlighting of personal realization through validating our capabilities according to social standards (Schwartz, 1992). This means that people engage in voluntary activities that eventually will turn into enforced behavior due to economic and demographic changes over time (Johansson, 2013).

Galster (1995) comments on the effects that neighborhoods have on the social opportunities their locals encounter. These locals perceive opportunities with the subjectivity of uncorroborated information that they manage rather than derived from previous experience. This manipulated information is gathered from different sources including the media and social networks - including their frequented places and other locals they know. As this information may or may not be credible, it affects the person's perception of opportunity and further achievement. Also, there is a strong social influence from this social network towards the person's way of acting, values and aspirations. On the basis of these criteria we may then say that achievements in life are strongly influenced not only by society but also culturally manipulated.

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[64] Cultural capital is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviors, and skills that one can tap into to demonstrate one's cultural competence, and thus one's social status or standing in society. Bourdieu defines it as familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society that is passed on through generations.

[65] Social capital are the links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together. https://www.oecd.org › insights

3.3.2.The media

Although the media is a topic that for some may be only related to marketing and ultimately to socialization, it certainly has a strong influence on how people act and interact in society. In this sense, we can say that it can be strongly related to decision making, thus also having influence in the dropout decision.

According to Mehraj, Bhat & Mehraj (2014), "Media are the vehicles or channels which are used to convey information, entertainment, news, education, or promotional messages are disseminated. Media includes every broadcasting and narrowcasting medium such as television, radio, newspapers, billboards, mails, telephone, fax, internet, etc." (i.e. the main means of mass communication) (p. 56). The authors compare mass media as a hypodermic needle used to change people's attitudes and habits. They argue that media can be used to communicate perspectives related to the concept of development since it can provide the necessary information and orientation needed for change.

In this sense, the media is not only used by the consumer industry to inform about products, services and prices, but as a bombardment tool to promote consumerism itself. It is a fact that without these advertisements, people will not know what is to be bought and even enjoyed. There exists a bi-directional relationship between the consumer and advertiser that also maintains the economy. On another point of view, Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli & Shanahan (2002) claim that "television is a centralized system of storytelling," (p. 44) as it is used to establish the targeted audience's predispositions and manipulate preferences. These could be, for example, in the form of TV series showing mysteries, thrillers, how a family lives a modern life, and even cooking shows. In this sense, I can relate how people exposed to this bombardment are prone to imitate lifestyles; this including university students who have not yet started their adult life and need to cope with these standards.

Bauman (2007) explains that consumerism persuades people of the need to have things, and buying more than what is needed. With the help of the media, people are not only convinced to buy things or pay for services that sometimes are not really needed, but are also induced into believing they do need certain things. This behavior then appears to become a cycle in which people want to buy, but in order to buy they need to earn money

and therefore need to work. In this cycle, these people continue to be too busy to earn more money for the things they believe they need and often mistake or substitute happiness and even achievement, with the acquisition of these things.

Cline (1975) illustrates how the use of modeling or imitative learning can be of benefit to media audiences as he states: "The general notion behind modeling or imitative learning is that if you want someone to adopt a new behavior you show him a life or filmed model under attractive or glamorous conditions" (p. 23). But, whether something is a benefit or not depends on the perspective of the targeted individual. Therefore, television programs can be used to present any particular behavior to be accepted and imitated by the masses and influence their attitude towards this behavior. With this thought, Cline implies that values and behavior can be shaped to some degree for the sake of social change.

With regard to gender stereotyping in the media, Wood (1994) states that "All forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions" (p. 31). The author argues that there are three ways women are represented by the media. First, the underrepresentation and invisibility of women in the media, second the stereotyping that endorse the views of society towards women, and third, the depictions of traditional roles and violence.

Wood (1994) also comments on cultural views of gender that portray women as sex objects. These views show good women as attractive, dedicated to their family and caring for others while bad women often are fashionable, ambitious, adventurous, hard and cold. Contrastingly, the portrayal of the bad woman comprises qualities that are attributed to men and appear to be attractive to women that would like to be successful. To this, Chavez (2018) states that the media owns the required characteristics for spreading gender ideologies crucial to generate social change and portray a different woman.

3.3.3. Gender

In Panama, the concept of gender may be similar to that of other Latin American countries; however, it has its own characteristics according to the country's history, culture and even localizations. According to March, Smyth, & Mukhopadhyay (1999), "The experience of being male or female

differs dramatically from culture to culture. The concept of gender is used by sociologists to describe all the socially given attributes, roles, activities, and responsibilities connected to being a male or a female in a given society" (p. 18).

Panama is a country, where over the years, colonization, decolonization and even neocolonialism processes have left their mark. Nevertheless, it still suffers from patriarchy symptoms from the early colonization from Spain and the neocolonization period from the US. Among other socializing agencies, education also takes a great part in these processes as it influences society. Indeed, The American continent has experienced the sociocultural impact of the submission to other cultures and the subordination to a unique and unquestionable context and set of values under colonialism.

European knowledge was endorsed while the aboriginal and other non-European knowledge was to be excluded – the impacts of which are reflected in current Latin American educational institutions. According to Alpizar (2015), education can be designed to regulate what knowledge, beliefs and values are to be endorsed and what is supposed to be excluded. Alpizar also discusses the socio-cultural construction that raises inequalities of power between the sexes, as the role that patriarchal societies granted to women and men with regard to roles of power and submission and recognition and subjection. Patriarchy, which is found in the Bible and was later enforced by Roman law, has been pervasive in many societies for over two thousand years. These precepts on social order and authority were followed by Western colonizers and enforced in their colonies (Miller, 2017). Still today, most Panamanians have been raised with and live by models of patriarchy.

In the 20th century, the US had a strong influence in other countries because of its economic growth and consumer ideals, of which Panama could not escape. The media played its part in promoting the roles of men and women in the family. The roles for women were redefined and expanded through the participation of women in the political and social spheres. For example, amidst all the new Latin American republics, Panama came up with the most broad-minded constitution as it was directly influenced by the women's suffrage and rights movement in the US. The constitution differed from that of Colombia, for example, in which the right to citizenship and vote was originally only granted to men (Marco Serra, 2005).

Becker (1981) claimed that families in industrial societies such as the US at the beginning of the 20ᵗʰ century could pragmatically improve their family's condition when one partner focused on paid work and the other in taking care of the family and performing household chores. Becker's position is not gender prejudiced but, when applied to Panamanian society, this model perpetuated the ideas of only one parent working, mostly the father, who provided for all the family members. This created an androcentric cultural model (De La Torre, 2009).

The variety present in the Panamanian population has permitted the recognition of a range of families with both common and contrasting origins. Nevertheless, the specific characteristics of patriarchal cultural heritage is pervasive (Miller Ramirez, 1995). As an example, it may happen that anytime a Latin American is asked about their understanding of community, they may compare it to family since it is considered central to this concept (Ribeiro, 2000). In Panama, the nuclear family is generally in close contact with relatives and children that stay longer at home. The young ones may leave when married but also may bring the new family to their parents. The father is the head of the family and, if absent, the mother will take his place as a widow or as a single mother. According to Miller Ramirez (1995), this practice is reflected in the impact it has on family life, couples and the society in general. The author has witnessed gender discrimination in Panama constructed through educational models which influence children and, as they grow, disseminate into all facets of society.

With regard to university education, Smith (2004) posits that differences in educational achievement are strongly related to the performing role of female and male students. This idea does not mean that women succeed and men fail but refers to the points of view students have towards education. According to several studies, women succeed at university because they are more interested in pleasing teachers (Reay, 2001), general cooperation and dedication (Leonard, Daniels, Hey & Smith, 2000), and seeking staff support (Laurie, Dywer, Holloway & Smith 1999).

On the other hand, according to Smith (2004) (as cited in Francis, 2000), there is a "macho" behavior to fulfil which fits with the social construction discourse of the local context. Thus, male students tend to perform what is intended for the male role in the target society. Once again, in patriarchal societies this is what patriarchal ideology dictates a man should do. Therefore, in the Panamanian context, men see themselves as heads and

providers, and their goals will not be restricted to studying in order to succeed.

3.3.4. Generational influence

Generations have socio-cultural characteristics and attitudes in common. Shared values and attitudes, predominantly linked to work-related topics, are based on the experiences shared during years spent in educational systems. Ways of thinking and points of view may change from one generation to another and the Panamanian society does not escape to this.

The term generation has been used for decades while trying to explain social changes. The term denotes changes of values, beliefs, viewpoints and ambitions of people across time. Generations are outcomes of events attached to memories that influence people in their mindsets about society, interactions, institutions, family, (Conger, 2001) religion and gender roles that may change with aging (Strauss & Howe, 1997).

Twenge, Campbell & Freeman (2012) state that as society changes with time, generations or birth cohorts adapt and acquire new practices and behaviors that make them different to other generations as they are influenced by the sociocultural background of their own time periods. These authors posit that "generational differences are cultural differences" (p. 1045) and claim that in newer generations extrinsic values such as wealth, appearance and recognition appear to be more important than intrinsic values such as self-acceptance, affiliation and community. Hülür (2017) agrees and states that cohorts are also confronted with different social norms and expectations. Twenge et al. (2012) explains the disengagement showed by Generation Y (Millennials) regarding the concern for others as an item for social/community concern.

Moreover, Trzesniewski & Donnellan (2010) claim that socio-cultural changes in the past decades have promoted a transformation in the minds of new generations, making them more focused on themselves and less concerned about others and thus not socially connected. These two authors posit that Generation Y appears to positively expect to graduate from university but with idealistic expectations for what is yet to come and less persuaded by the idea of working hard in order to get a good job as the previous generation. In their study, this generation is presented as not very interested in materialistic trends and nevertheless indulgent to consumerism.

Putnam (2000) commented on the benefits of greater social capital[66] in order to have a better community life. This stance arises while he criticizes the levels of civic engagement that different generations have had and how they have changed over time. Putnam also refers to the incremented decrease of people's affiliation and attendance to churches and religious congregations in the past decades as evidence of social disengagement in relation to generational changes, stating that the latest generations are consistently more disengaged. As with civic engagement, cultural changes also have an impact on people since they shape their views into new ways and behaviors towards the need for social approval or conformity with others (Twenge & Im, 2007).

Certainly, there are many things that differ from one generation to another. This differences, that make a person belong to one generation or another, are precisely the factor that can make them decide whether it is a good idea to continue studying or dropping out.

3.3.5. Mobility and safety

Calderon Pimentel (2013), a Panamanian sociologist, illustrates in his research the unfortunate urban mobility[67] situation that takes place in Panama City. He calculated the transportation time a university student takes attending universities located in Panama City[68] to one to two hours each way; amounting to approximately four to five hours a day in public or private transport because of the distances as well as traffic between the student's residence and the institution.

Mobility and transportation are not synonyms. Transportation refers to the means used to move people and things, while mobility refers to having the access to transportation. Thus, mobility is a word that can be used in many contexts (i.e. economic, geographic, psychological, sociological, etc.) and it has a very close link to a person and their gradual change in life.

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[66] "… social capital refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." Putnam (2000)

[67] Urban mobility refers to the amount of trips generated daily by the inhabitants of a city, and the methods and conditions associated with such trips (means of transportation, length of the trip and time spent in transportation)

[68] The city of Panama is the capital and the largest city of the Republic of Panama. It occupies an area of 275 km2 in a country that has a territorial extension of 75,517 km2.

Residential mobility, which refers to the movement of households within urban areas also influences people. According to Coulton, Theodos & Turner (2012), "Residential mobility is a process that changes lives and neighborhoods" (p. 56). It is often expected that moving to a new (often better) neighborhood or community is a matter of succeeding in life or starting to gain life stability (Henderschott, 1989). Apart from this, moving to a new residence can also be related to an increased risk of dropping out from studies because of decreased academic performance (Ersing, Sutphen, & Loffler, 2009). This can be attributed to academic problems such as lower levels of educational attachment and academic performance because of the stress involved in moving places (South, Haynie & Bose, 2007).

Indeed, residential mobility is among the many risk factors related to educational failure regardless of its frequency (Kerbow, 1996). To this idea, Haelermans & De Witte (2015) concur that it does not matter where a person moves to as the residential change itself is sufficient to feel, act and behave differently, which in turn increases the individual's dropout risk. In addition, Coleman (1988) claims that the act of moving promotes the loss of social capital associated with family and community support. To this, Ainsworth (2002) adds that a known characteristic of residential mobility is the effect it has on friendship and lessened confidence with close ones.

In addition, indicators of residential mobility[69] [70] should require information on the distance a person has moved, which is complex because longer-distance moves are expected to be more disturbing than short-distance moves regardless of the quality of household of community. On the other hand, residential stability is perceived to be positive and associated with spending time in educational activities and increased community interaction. Turkey & Harknett (2010) also claim that "residential stability is associated with stronger personal safety nets irrespective of neighborhood quality." (p.1)

With special attention to Panama City's problem, Melo Lerma (2012) states that Panama is characterized as having a service economy which has

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[69] "Newly-constructed, cross-country comparable indicators on key structural features of OECD housing markets transaction include costs, rental regulations, tenant protection arrangements and the responsiveness of housing supply." OECD Journal: Economic Studies, 2011.

[70] "…survey questions on residential mobility cover a wide range of topics, including employment, income, hardship, community engagement, satisfaction with neighborhood services, and perceptions of neighborhood quality, safety, and social cohesion. (Coulton, Theodos & Turner, 2012) Survey from the Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative.

influence on mobility. To this, Melo Lerma (2012) recommends to those in charge of enhancing access to transportation means in the city center to consult Panamanian universities, which know by heart the current problems and even study them as part of their curricula.

With respect to safety issues, research suggests that living in high risk neighborhoods is a determinant factor for dropouts. However, the safety risk a person experiences with relation to residential mobility may also be the time in which a person moves between one point and another (i.e. during transportation). In his study, DeVries (2013) claims that safety, or the lack of it, and choosing to live in the proximity of the campus were factors that contributed to student's decision to live in the university campus area.

In a country were the economy is very dynamic and the real estate industry grows every year, young families dream of owning a piece of land, a house or a roof of their own. In the case of this study, I will refer specifically to residential mobility and transportation as they are crucial to those students attending university in Panama City and its surroundings and it should be seriously taken into account regarding university students' decisions (Holloway, 1998). The metropolitan context in this research conveys the need to better address the effects of the place where students live also in regards to mobility, transportation and safety issues during the transportation.

3.4. Personal Development Theories

Dropping out from one's studies is often associated with failure (Calderon Pimentel, 2012; Rianda, 2008; Durkheim, 1951). However, many people do not share this idea and transform their circumstances into positive achievements. People generally attend university with the aim of educating themselves and therefore making progress in their life to advance in their personal development. Personal development is often related to the success a person can have in the labor market. But getting a better job position or salary is not the only way people can recognize or experience improvement in their lives.

The term "personal development or self-development" has a psychological connotation as it has been referred to in psychological theories such as the Hierarchy of Needs Model (Maslow, 1962). Indeed, psychology and sociology have two different focal points regarding these terms, yet both

refer to human behavior. When speaking about personal development, psychology is interested in behaviors and how the mind influences them, plus how the world is processed by emotional and mental processes towards the enhancement of the person itself (Broughton & Riegel, 1977), whereas sociology focuses on how individual interactions shape society and therefore the world's development (Mead, 1934).

From the psychological point of view, Broughton & Riegel (1977) state that "Development is in fact taken as the defining quality of life and of the human Self" (p. 156). Therefore, personal development comprises mental, physical, emotional, social and spiritual development allowing individuals to procure an effective and satisfying life within the standards of their society by accomplishing their aspirations, dreams and goals.

From the sociological point of view, George Herbert Mead, an American sociologist, delineated the social process conducted by an individual's mind. He claims that every person develops their self-image according to their interactions with other people. Mead (1934), in his theory of the self, presents the idea of the "I" and the "ME"; that is, with the "ME" being the social self (i.e., the object, attitudes that the person assumes from others' behavior) and the "I" being the person's impulses (the unpredictable response to others) (p. 178).

Mead elaborates on the self-consciousness of people with the idea that in order to be self-conscious about one's life, a person first needs to get involved in different positions in society. The person will see themself through the eyes of others. And, although we are born unsocialized beings, we later accept the culture, values and norms of the society in which we are born. In this way, society takes a dominant position over the person and becomes a social control factor.

Mead (1934) claims that the "self" is the result of social experience; which depends on how people see others as "taking the role of the others" (160-161). Therefore, the "I" self starts the action and the "ME" self continues or changes the action depending on how "the others" react. Mead was convinced that in order to understand self-development (or personal development), one also must understand "the role of the other", which is the overall idea that a person has toward the general expectations of others within their social circle.

In his theory, Mead (1934) explains several sociological points of emphasis as steps in the process of a person's development. First, the influence social relationships have towards attitudes and behaviors: the person (as a child)

learns attitudes and values, and imitates appropriate actions of the members of the culture. Second, the person is affected by social institutions. The person, as a member of a small group within a society, adopts appropriate behavior. And third, the person affects others as well as groups and organizations. This is, the person's behavior (as an adult) is stimulated by peer groups rather than by parents.

Later, the anthropologists Beatrice Whiting and John Whiting (1975) developed a psycho-cultural model in an attempt to show how the characteristics of the surrounding environment, peers, institutions, cultural systems and its values relate to an individual's development. Their focus was on understanding situations in which people are involved as a cultural process in as detailed a way as possible in order to understand personal development. In a later work, Beatrice Whiting (1976) emphasized the importance of not using broad variables in this research topic as she believed that the characters and setting in which life happens define the course of an individual's development.

Personal development is also part of human development yet distinct. According to the Human Development Report (HDRO) 1990, which discusses the concept and measures of human development, "Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living." Based on the theories described, I adopt my own definition of personal development as an ongoing process by which people attempt to increase all their potential and achieve their goals, moved by an interest to overcome in all aspects of life, as well as the need to give meaning to their lives. Personal development is constantly related to satisfaction, well-being and even happiness.

Building on this definition, I take into consideration the belief that every human is different; not only in DNA but also in ways of understanding and learning, social and physical environment, priorities and expressions. There is no cognitive or social standard that dictates how a person should evolve.

3.4.1. Dropout effects on personal development

Choices in life always have an effect on our lives. These effects may occur in the immediate future or may occur much later, but will happen in a way that is dependent on how the person addresses a situation. On dropouts, Schnepf (2015) provides us with a recent study with an interesting point of

view. His study contrasts the advantages a person has who has dropped out with people who have not enrolled at all. The study ponders whether people dropped out from university temporarily or permanently. It shows that dropouts will have better progress in their careers and personal development than those who never enrolled and. The study also explains, however, that evidence on the effect former dropouts have in the labor market is scarce and thus this aspect requires further examination.

According to Haybron (2011) in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, happiness can be identified as a state of mind such as hedonism, as an emotional state, or as a state of well-being such as a person having a life that goes well. This state of well-being differs from person to person as it depends on personal value judgements and also a matter of self-fulfillment vs. correctness. Happiness is often connected to life satisfaction theories. Alexandrova (2005) claims that life satisfaction can be closely related to priorities that a person has and the subjective well-being out of the satisfaction feeling is a result of the judgement a person applies to their life according to what they personally define as a requirement for their own happiness or happiness generally. This is, people can feel very satisfied with what they have or even with much less than what they have. This is because their personal development does not depend exactly on how many things they possess or what they have achieved, but rather on their perception of the value of things and objectives of their plans. For this reason we can be satisfied without having what we intended to have at the time.

To develop satisfactorily in only one or several aspects of our lives that we consider to be important can be enough to feel satisfied and thus increase our personal development. Therefore, the effect of dropping out of university will definitely have an effect on the student, but this effect could be perceived as positive or negative by the individual depending on whether he is able to fulfil his expectations in life.

3.4.2.Aspirations and life priorities

Aspirations are needed in order to accomplish settled goals. But even without aspirations, a person can feel satisfied and fulfilled with their life goals. Thus, every person has a different set of life priorities or achievement standards that start depending on how successful they are in whatever is significant to them (Savig & Schwartz, 2000). Quaglia & Cobb (1996) claim

that an aspiration is the ambitious goal that a student sets for oneself that adds a sense of purpose and impulse so the student is inspired to progress towards that goal. Furthermore they provide us with this useful and simple explanation, "…a student with aspirations is one who is involved in various activities for both their inherent value and enjoyment and their connection to future goals" (p. 127).

According to Sherwood (1989), aspirations also require the investment of time, effort and/or money in order to be fulfilled. A person with aspirations should build a strategy that includes investment and risks in order to get to its goal. In addition, aspirations are also attached to commitment. The commitment a person has towards this aspiration comprises the elements of intensity and duration. Intensity refers to the measurement and quantity of resources a person is willing to invest in the aspiration, while duration refers to the lapse of time between the initial investment and moment of achievement or abandonment of the settled goal.

Herbert Blumer (1986) explains that "People are forced to direct their own conduct or handle their situations in terms of what they take into account" (p. 8). Blumer explains how every person has to manage their actions to fit in line with activities of others. Thus, life priorities may change based on the activities of those who surround us (i.e. family). Lastly, Blumer contributes the idea that it is necessary to consider that people behave towards things according to their meanings or what those things represent for them.

With regard to life priorities among students at risk of dropping out, Carvajal & Cervantes (2018) conclude that:

> "Students must try to maintain a balance between all their activities. However, when faced with stressful and unforeseen family situations, they (the students) feel pressured to choose between assuming the responsibilities deriving from their different roles and continuing their studies."

There are common life situations such as ill relatives or the unexpected death of a person in the family or even divorce that may affect any person in the way their priorities in life are organized. As a result, these occurrences may disturb a student of any age, causing them to drop out from their studies and prioritize what is most important for them. Berglund (2014) claims "To get a balance in life, a person needs to learn how to detect and evaluate what is important for his/her well-being" (p. 4). Thus,

prioritizing plans and goals helps to maintain a balance in our lives by understanding the importance of every situation and their relation to our needs.

3.4.3.Is university education needed for personal development?

In their recent study, Ahn & Baek (2012) discuss the relationship between education and development. They state that the educational system has a tremendous role in promoting economic growth and thus development. This development, the authors argue, is not only the nation's development as a whole but the advantages in life that a person can acquire through education towards accessing a higher socio-economic strata; which differs from the traditional value of learning for the sake of personal development. Youkhana, Leifkes & Leon-Sicard (2018) argue that the focus of programs offered by universities nowadays have been adapted in favor of the enrichment of markets and economic growth attached to the scientific method framework in search of human capital while overlooking other ways of acquiring knowledge and making a living.

On this same thought, Husen (1985) analyzed the current educational tendencies reaching the conclusion that with regard to education, our modern society has become credential-oriented and meritocratic. In his work, Husen explains that there is an increasing competition for scores and degrees as well as for formal education in order to obtain employment. Therefore, students as job-seekers compare how high they have been able to escalate in the job market. This is an example of the influence job market tendencies have to intellectual talent that is measured by tests and scores. This increased competition transforms the value of learning to be motivated by external factors such as socio-economic status rather than the intrinsic motivation to acquire knowledge.

As another example, there is the international trend of learning English as a second language. The aim is to form new professionals with a bilingual ability as an added skill. But, on the other hand, the interest of being bilingual is focused on learning English only since it is an international commercial language which provides opportunity for building human capital and conducive to the international labor market, this process can leave other native languages aside, which are crucial to contributing to local knowledge production (Youkhana, Leifkes & Leon-Sicard, 2018).

Another consequence of this competition is the labeling and stereotyping of winners and losers, affecting future job opportunities and better income possibilities. In relation to this, Van Bragt, et al. (2011) comment on Vermunt (1992) regarding different types of motivational orientations toward education. One of these types is "certificate oriented", which aims solely at getting a degree or diploma. The degree should further lead to a job position or a better employment opportunity.

Matosa & Silveira (2003) believe that in order to succeed in the labor market as a formal or informal worker, a person should be able to identify and evaluate their abilities, limitations and resources, embracing the correct attitude and engineering their opportunities for self-development. For this, the person needs to manage responsibility, independence and capacity to take decisions. With these, the person will be able to remain socially included and perpetuate their time in the labor market.

In an alternative approach, Rogoff (2003) explains how scientists of the 1960's and 70's performed tests with the aim of measuring people's ways of thinking and their abilities to be unprejudiced and independent to their previous experiences or backgrounds; testing classification, logic and memory in everyday activities. The results contradicted expectations. Results showed that the same participants that scored poorly on tests appeared remarkably skilled in situations outside the tests' situations; challenging the assumption that those who go to school become smarter than those who do not go to school. This illustrates the vague connection between education and test performance.

Conversely, Astin (1993) proposed that pursuing university studies has strong effects on the development of the students' interpersonal skills. This development is achieved by creating and improving attitudes towards life while broadening intellectual competence and strengthening responsibility. On the other hand, Schalock, et al., (2016), state that people who are intended to pursue their studies at university mostly do not focus on developing their personal talents and growth opportunities but in earning a diploma in order to present it in their future job interview. It also depends on the level and kind of motivation they have at the moment of making choices and taking decisions. Claes, Van Hove, Vandevelde, Van Loon, and Schalock (2012) claim that in terms of personal development, it is necessary that people focus on their personal improvement while individualized support from the institution is also important for changing their quality of life. Sadly, here is where some higher education institutions fail.

3.5.   Conceptual framework

At the moment of taking the decision to drop out from university, a student will take into account many factors that surround them. One of these factors could be practices in their community that drive them to drop out. The conceptual framework for this research proposes that socio-cultural practices performed in different societies have different effects on the communities in which people live. Differences are due to communities varying in their characteristics. After dropping out, the former student will evaluate the outcomes of this decision and determine whether it contributed to their personal development or not. (figure 7).

This framework also proposes that the decision to stay or to drop out from studies and the resulting consequences have a determinant effect on a person's personal development and consequently the human development of the community they belong to. This human development will later also influence socio-cultural practices in society and therefore the community.
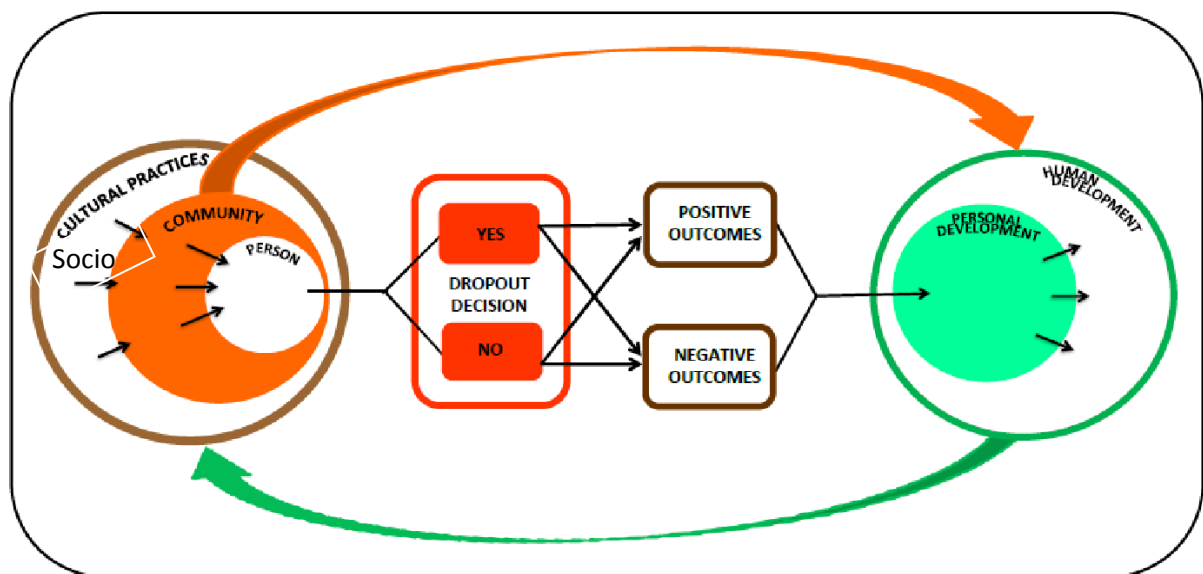
Figure 7. Conceptual Framework. Source: author.

Based on the literature review, drawing heavily from dropout theories, this conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the process which the university student that drops out follows:

- The person (the student), which lives in a community that is influenced by socio-cultural practices within the community, which eventually takes the decision to drop out from their studies.
- The decision of dropping out or not which indistinctively can lead to positive or negative outcomes.
- The outcomes which directly affect the personal development of the individual and indirectly have an effect on human development of the community.

Besides the variety of factors that influence university students to drop out from university, there are also underlying socio-cultural practices that have an effect on these individuals throughout their lives and thus the dropout process. The framework takes no priority among factors but assumes that a variety of factors including personal, social and cultural can also lead to dropping out from university.

3.6.   Conclusion

The dropout phenomenon in Panama is a predominant issue at university level just as at all other educational levels. This phenomenon affects student populations while the institutions in charge of dealing with it focus rather on student-centered statistics such as performance scores and ratings. Contrastingly, previous research suggests that these issues should be addressed not only in terms of descriptive statistics but also through correlations among variables including institutional, economic, social and cultural experiences.

In order to broaden the previous research done in Panama regarding the university dropout topic, this study explores social and cultural variants and student perspectives toward the dropout phenomenon. Its aim is to illustrate related reasons for interrupting or quitting university studies and also gather new insights regarding personal perspectives on overcoming dropping out in order to procure personal development.

4. CHAPTER   Research design

4.1.   Overview of the study

This research starts from the perspective that it is not always necessary to graduate from university in order to be successful in life and be satisfied, and that dropouts have not given up this possibility.

In order to explore these thoughts, this study was performed with the aim of not only collecting factors connected to the participants' university dropout decision but also describing socio-cultural practices associated with university dropouts and their personal development experiences. For this, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach[71] (Smith, 1996) is used to obtain the necessary evidence to describe the target phenomenon (university dropouts) from the perspective of each individual. This is to include the use of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, surveys and narrative interviews.

I attempt to give an overview on how the interviewed Panamanians label socio-cultural practices with regard to educational matters that individuals in a community share; practices that influence them every time they take a decision about their life and future. This study does not intend to describe the higher education dropout phenomenon in Panama but rather the factors associated with it and its positive or negative consequences. Moreover, the study investigates the subsequent numerous paths of personal development each individual involved in the study has experienced after having dropped out, the meaning each of the interviewees give to their lived experiences, and also the interpretation I can contribute.

In the IPA approach[72], the analysis is described as having a double hermeneutic or double interpretation in which the participants in the research elaborate on the meaning they give to their life experiences while the researcher interprets it if necessary (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Accordingly, my objective is to grasp the position of the target individual's

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[71] The aim of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study are the meanings particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants. The approach is phenomenological in that it involves detailed examination on the participant's life; it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event (Smith, 2004). A detailed analysis of personal accounts followed by presenting and discussing the generic experiential themes is typically paired with the researcher's own interpretation, as an expression of double hermeneutics in practice (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

group towards the dropout phenomenon and also explain the socio-cultural influences at play when the individual dropped out. As Creswell (2005) states: "The intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon" (p. 203).

Also, the IPA approach has an idiographic orientation that in this research will be fulfilled by analyzing incongruences in points of view. The research does not aim to be universal or significant but rather contrast cases (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995).[73] This approach mixes prior conventions and new perceptions of the target phenomenon (Vicary, 2017). Thus, the goal of this study is to rely on the participants' views of the dropout phenomenon, their observations on educational behavior within their community and their descriptions of how their life developed after their dropout.

4.2.   **Design and setting**

For this study, all universities in and around Panama City were taken into consideration since these universities have the highest registration rates due to the population concentration in the capital city. The sample of participants who had attended vocational and technical institutions geographically located nearby Panama City was gathered.

Target individuals are those who have:

- dropped out from universities in Panama City,
- dropped out between the years 2001 to 2010 (this forms the cohort),
- and be Panamanian and live in Panama City; specifically in the District of Panama and the special District of San Miguelito.[74]

These districts were chosen because they are the most populated districts[75] in the Province of Panama, within which is the capital, Panama City.

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[73] Although this research does not contain case studies, three narrative interviews will be used to fulfil the ideographic orientation of the IPA approach.

[74] The District of Panama has evolved since the foundation of Panama City in 1519. The District of San Miguelito was formed out of an internal migration of families from the countryside in 1960. At first, it had only five corregimientos (see footnote 68 below). As of 2019, it has been reorganized into nine corregimientos. Not all the corregimientos are the same in terms of urbanization and topography.

[75] The estimation of the total population in the Republic of Panama as of July 1, 2016 was 4,037,043 inhabitants. The largest population center is the Metropolitan Area of Panama. The total population of the Province of Panama is estimated at 1,544,185 of which 1,119,681 (72.5%) are in the District of Panama and 360,101 (23.3%) in San Miguelito (INEC, 2016). The District of San Miguelito

San Miguelito District is founf inside the Distric of Panama. These two districts belong to the metropolitan area in the capital province of Panama (see figure 8) and house the greatest concentration of the country's population. These districts are divided into corregimientos[76] and their extents may contrast in the environment of their neighborhoods.

Figure 8: Location of Province of Panama, District of Panama and District of San Miguelito.

In this analysis, I will try to capture some of the variation by distinguishing the different corregimientos. One of these differences may be the age of the corregimiento as an aspect of differentiation on its locals' behavior or practices. It is important to take into account that this study is not representative of the given corregimientos and its communities but nevertheless tries to portray how the interviewees (former dropouts and community members) see and feel while living in their communities.

The study was divided into two phases in order to first gather a sample of former dropouts and explore possible limitations of the research. The first phase is focused on the factors that influence the dropout decision, especially socio-cultural factors and practices in the participant's community. In this phase I interview former dropouts, community

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represents 9% of the country's population (Mendoza, Mejia, Carrasco & Vallarino, 2017). Founded on June 23, 1960, it is called "the special district" according to the 1972 constitution.

[76] Corregimiento is a subdivision of a district, which in turn is a subdivision of a province. It is the smallest administrative division in the country; which are further subdivided into (non-administrative) neighborhoods.

members and experts. The second phase focuses on the participants' outcomes after dropping out and their further personal development. In this phase I conducted three narrative interviews (figure 9).
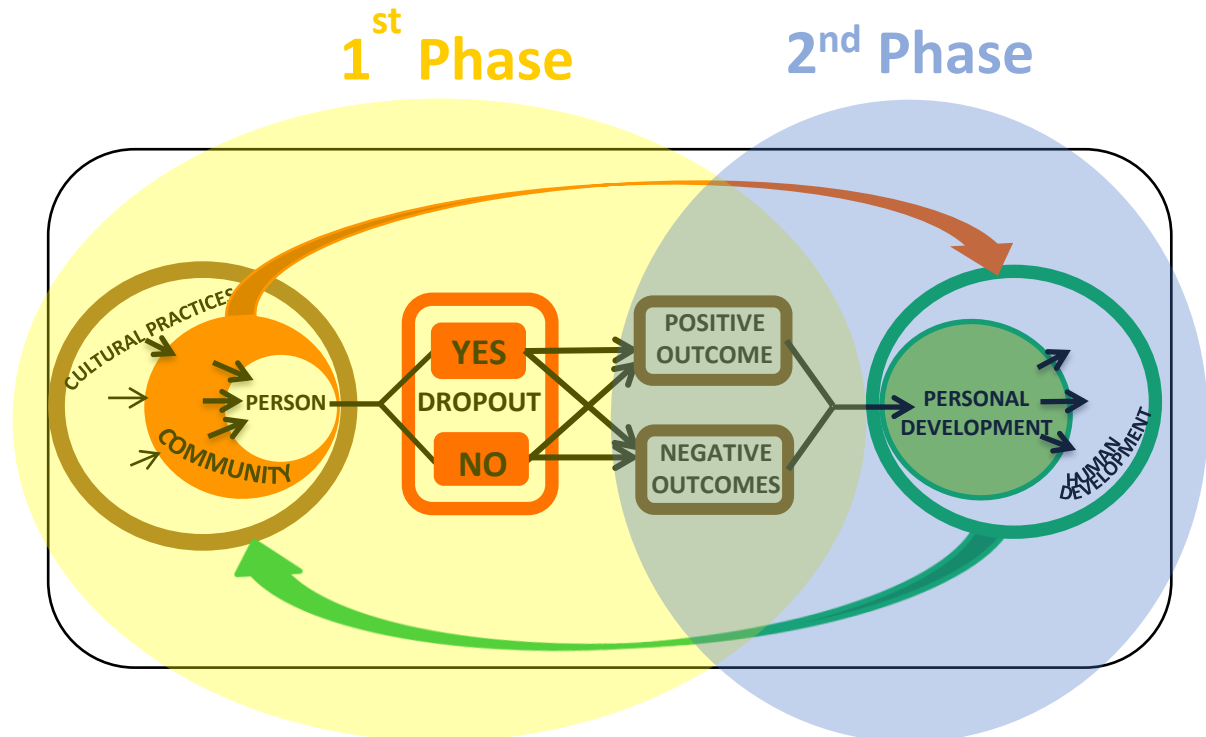
Figure 9: The two study phases of this research.

4.3. Sample selection process and ethical consent

With respect to the sample size in this study, I adopt Patton's (1990) position on sampling, where he states:

> "There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 184).

Thus, the sample size necessary in order to gather a suitable amount of data that is representative in terms of diversity of the targeted population is necessary. In order to gather information-rich samples, a purposeful sampling approach is used with the chain referral or "snowball sampling" technique (Patton, 1990). With this technique, previously contacted participants will be asked to use their social networks to suggest other respondents to the researcher; that is, other people who could potentially

participate in the study This method is particularly useful for cases such as this in which the target population is not easily identifiable or accessible (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).The general purpose of using this technique is to gather a sample of students with the desired characteristics.

The focus group discussion was organized as a gathering among neighbors from the same community and the attendants were paid for; i.e., group participants were given a token amount equivalent to a meal for taking the time to attend the session.

This study started in 2015. The student cohort selected for the study starts from 2001 and runs through to 2010. The 10-year time frame provides an opportunity to compare student experiences and leaves a period of at least five years after dropping out in order to explain their life changes regarding personal development.

The methods used in gathering the sample were purposeful snowball sampling performed at non-formal vocational governmental agencies,

- referees by university professors,

- referees by other professors and

- referees by other participants.

After first contacting prospective participants referred by their former professors, further communication was established individually by phone. Appointments were made to interview each participant and they were asked to choose a location for the interview.

Following what Rossman and Rallis (2003) posit about maintaining the confidentiality of the study participants, the preservation of the participants' identities and the assurance that their names will not be associated with any stories was of utmost importance. All the participants in this study were informed of the purpose of the study during their recruitment and before the interview session. Participants were also informed of the confidentiality of the study and were asked to sign a consent form prior to starting the survey, interview and focus group discussion.

This informed consent described the research topic, the nature of the study, the purpose and potential benefits of it, the extent of involvement as voluntary, the freedom to withdraw at any time without any repercussion, guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, information on the researcher,

the offer to share the research findings and a space for the approval signature of the participant. According to Mertler (2008), with the signature of an informed consent containing the mentioned information will be an attestation of understanding the nature of the study, anonymity and confidentiality treatment of identities, what will be asked and also the possibility of opting out without any penalty.

All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by my assistant after the conclusion of the interview as was stated in the informed consent; and only my tutor and supervisor had access to the data, which was also stated in the consent form. After agreeing to participate in the study, every participant was offered a copy of the consent form.

4.4.   **Data collection methods**

The research data were collected using several methods during separate steps. First, I performed interviews with university authorities and other staff working at these universities.

Second, I applied demographic surveys, prior to conducting semi-structured interviews, with 50 former dropouts and 11 community members. The surveys included questions on background information regarding economic indicators, family, marital status, health, cultural capital, and sex, among others.

Third, I held two focused group discussions with community members. I also conducted 3 narrative interviews with former dropouts to explore their views on the need of university studies and personal development. Lastly, I collected secondary data on higher education provided by government agencies.

4.4.1. Interviews with former dropouts

After a snowball sampling process, prospective participants were contacted by phone and in person to set up an appointment for an interview. Those who attended the interview were given an introductory talk about the purpose and expectations of the study. All interviews were held in Spanish, the mother tongue of all participants. I provide an English translation of every interviewee quote with the original Spanish in a footnote.

The semi-structured interviews were held first in order to build rapport and allow for three narrative interviews with repeat interviewees (see annex 2 for the full guide for semi-structured interviews). "Rapport encourages informants to talk about their culture. Eliciting information fosters the development of rapport" (Spradley, 1979. p.44). Fifty semi-structured interviews were performed in order to consider the former dropouts' opinions and convictions. In a second phase, three participants were invited to provide narrative interviews about their particular experiences with the dropout process and their personal development after dropping out of their studies. The three participants were selected out of their willingness to contribute to the study and time disposition.

Interviews with former dropouts and community members aimed to collect general data related to family background, personal reasons for dropping out, observations on general reasons for others dropping out, community environment, and aspirations and achievements related to personal development.

Interviews with community members were focused on the observation of factors that affect university students and later lead them to drop out from their university studies and also community environment. Interviews with university authorities and staff were held with the aim of exploring the institutional point of view about the dropout phenomenon and factors that may contribute to it.

Focus groups discussed community practices that promote university dropouts. These groups self-reflected on their own experiences and on observations of people that lived in their community who had dropped out. Also, three narrative interviews were held in order to illustrate in-depth lived experiences, reasons for dropping out and most important, the consequences that taking the decision of dropping out had on their personal development.

4.4.2. Demographic data

The social theories that inspire this study take the standpoint that education is a major activity in any social system (Tinto, 1975; Spady, 1971; Parsons, 1949). Additionally, cultural systems must be included in our way of understanding society. The demographic survey considered information such as place of residence, age, gender, civil status, number of people living

together, family background, what year and from what university they dropped out from and occupation. This information was gathered with the aim of supplementing the interviews and to determine the heterogeneity of the sample. The demographic survey was administered to the 50 initial participants immediately before the interviews.

The survey was applied to 26 women and 24 men and revealed that out of 50 interviewed participants, 44% of the participants were between the ages of 26 to 30. Twenty-eight percent of the entire sample were female participants within this youngest age group (table 7)
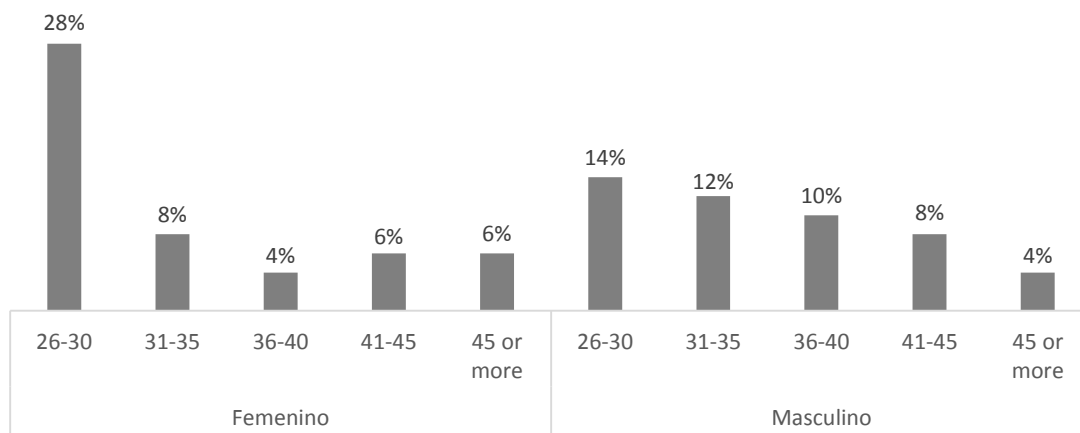
Table 7. Age and gender of the sample.

At present, the majority of all participants are in the youngest age group between 26-30 years old while the least were 45 years old or more. The survey also shows that almost half of the total participants were single at the time of the dropout, followed by married individuals (Table 8).
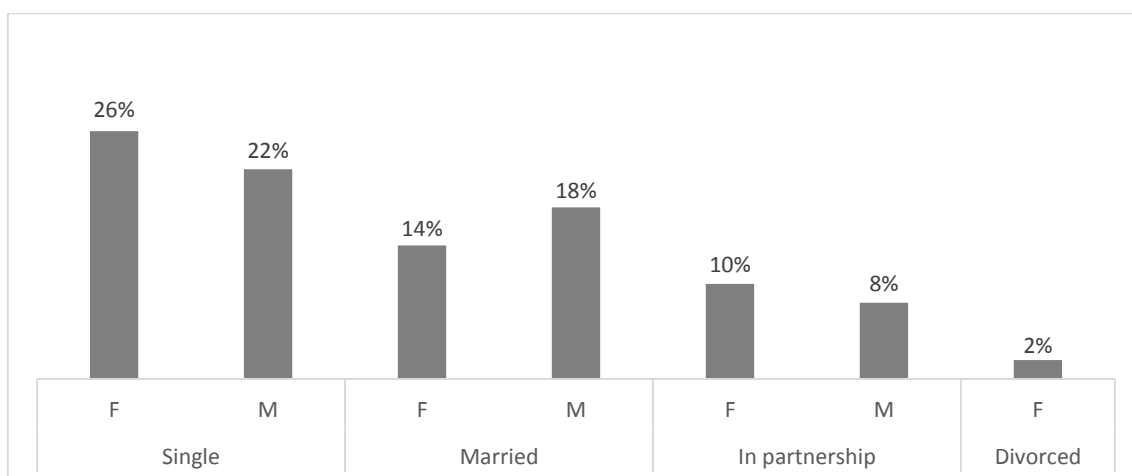
Table 8. Current civil status of former dropouts by percentage, male and female.

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Regarding the family background of the survey participants, 30% of the participants' mothers attended elementary school, 42% reached high school and only 28% completed university studies. Regarding the fathers' education level there is certain ambiguity with 12% of participants stating that they do not know if the father attended school or not. Of those who were able to provide an answer, 26% attended elementary school, 42% reached high school and 20% completed university studies (table 9).

Level of education of the mother

Bachelor degree	Elementary school	High school	Masters degree
16%	30%	42%	12%

Level of education of the father

Bachelors degree	Elementary school	High school	I don´t know	Masters degree
16%	26%	42%	12%	4%
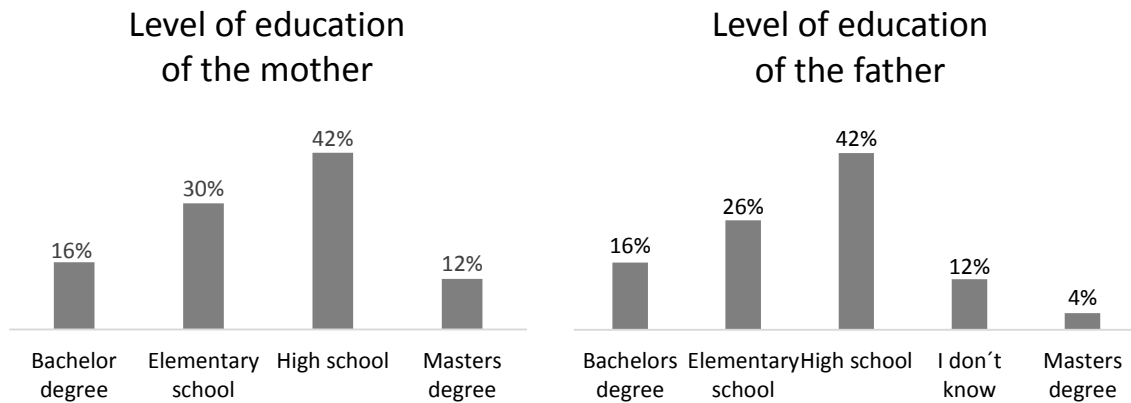
Tables 9. Former dropout parent's level of education.

Regarding the number of people living in the same household, 14% were composed of two persons, 24% of three persons, 28% of four persons, 16% of five persons and 18% of more than five persons. The survey also showed that 68% of the participants who dropped out attended the University of Panama, followed by Universidad Interamericana de Panama with 28% and Universidad Tecnologica de Panama with 14% (table 10).

University attended at time of dropout

University	Percentage
Universidad Tecnologica de Panama	14%
Universidad Santa Maria La Antigua	2%
Universidad Latina de Panama	8%
Universidad Interamericana	28%
Universidad del Istmo	2%
Universidad de Panama	34%
Universidad de Las Americas	6%
Universidad Americana	4%
Otra	2%
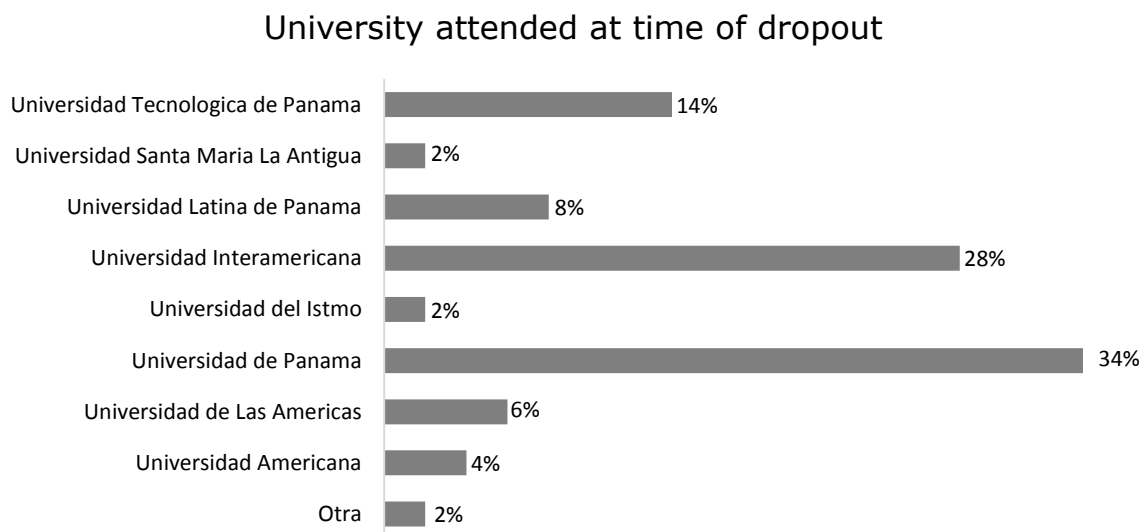
Table 10. University attended at time of dropout.

The participants reported that most currently have formal employment, meaning an indefinite working contract at the time of dropping out (table 11).
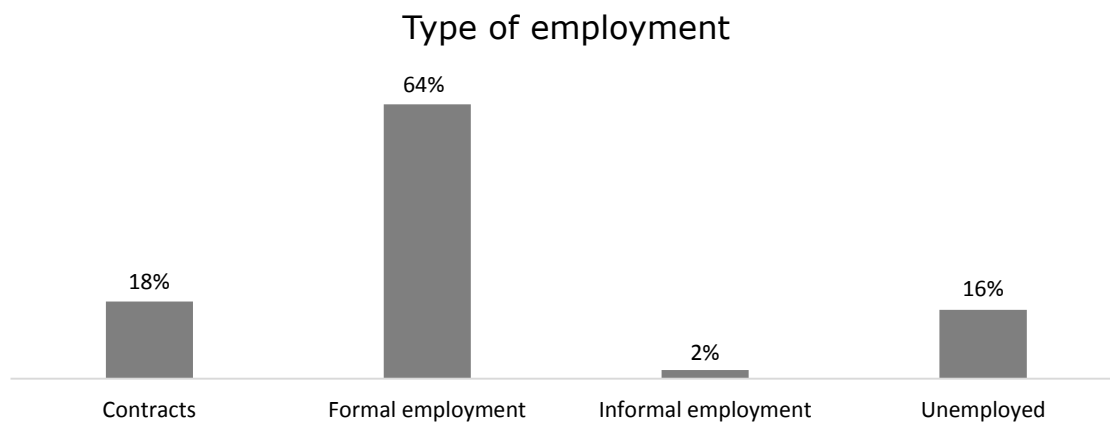
Type of employment

Table 11. Former dropouts' employment status.

Finally, participants of this survey were also asked about feeling embarrassed about their decision to drop out. Eighty percent stated that they do not feel embarrassed about it and 20% do. The question is not demographic, but was rather intended to better understand how these participants feel about being a university dropout and how it is accepted by others. Because this may be a sensitive or uncomfortable question, it was purposely put at the end of the survey to increase the chance of an honest response.

4.4.3. Interviews with university authorities and staff

Expert interviews with university authorities with vast knowledge on the matter were planned, as well as national researchers and education authorities as a matter of a consultative approach (Oberg, 2010). Depending on availability, the interviews were offered in person or by telephone. All participants chose face-to-face interviews. Interviews with university authorities and staff were held on two occasions. The first wave of interviews was in May 2016 and then again in April 2017. In total, 5 persons were interviewed. The interviewees are as follow:

- **Licdo. Omar Joseph Jr.** - former student of the University of Panama. At that time, he was involved in one of the most prominent student associations tasked with giving support and advice to new and current students. Currently, he works as a public relations specialist at the University of Panama newspaper.

- **Dr. Manuel Calderon** - sociologist and researcher at Instituto de Estudios Nacionales (IDEN, University of Panama)

- **Prof. Euclides Antonio Mendez** – sociologist and researcher at the Research Center of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Panama

- **Dr. Mirna Vallejos de Crespo** – vice minister of education at the Ministry of Education of Panama, rector at Universidad Latina de Panama

- **Mgtr. Adriana Maritza Angarita** – rector at Universidad del Istmo Panama, president at the Association of Private Universities of Panama

- **Administrative staff** – Universidad de Santander, Panamá. Although the rector at this university did not participate actively in the interview, she invited part of her staff to join and share their observations about dropouts and strategies to reducing dropouts at their university.

The questions for these interviews were developed in order to triangulate responses from former dropouts previously interviewed, validate the awareness of the issue and explore strategies for overcoming it. These questions take into consideration aspects such as understanding the dropout phenomenon, existing policies, and personal opinions (see annex 3 for interview guide for university authorities and staff).

4.4.4. Focus group discussions

Two focus group discussions were held with a total of 17 participants. Focus group one had 8 participants and focus group 2 had 9 participants. One group belong to the District of Panama and the other to the District of San Miguelito. Participants consisted of a mixed group of people who have dropped out, others who were still attending classes at university and other community members such as their parents and neighbors. There was no specific selection for these groups except for an informal invitation to meet and contribute to a particular research topic on education.

From these two groups, the first group (focus group #1) consisted of a church community with members of mixed ages between 25 to 45 years

old that either used to live or still live in the same neighborhood, Corregimiento de Pacora, Distrito de Panama. The second group (focus group #2) consisted of a group of friends between the ages of 26 to 35 also living in the same neighborhood, Corregimiento de Rufina Alfaro, Distrito de San Miguelito. Both sessions were held in the house backyard of one of the participants and lasted approximately two hours.

Participants were asked to give comments or feedback to each other during the session to ensure that they listened to each other and had the opportunity to explore, react and identify themselves with the topic. This also enables the facilitator to have a broader view on the participants' perceptions and offer a better explanation about the way topics are perceived (Spradley, 1979). Results obtained through this activity could be compared and matched among all participants' opinions since they were expected to provide input on the same topic (Nohl, 2009).

The focused group discussion method was used in this study to evidence that knowledge is constructed not only by observable phenomena, but also by descriptions of people's imitations, beliefs, values, reasons, meaning-making, and self-understanding (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). Focus group discussions also enable the goal of not only describing but explaining phenomena that we experience.

The topics elicited during the discussion included experiences related to university studies, generational issues, characteristics of the community, factors that influence university dropout, and benefits or disadvantages of dropping out. Using focus group discussions, I was able to listen to how the participants share in the social structure of their community and what they think about their participation and contribution to it. This became possible as they posed their perspectives and judgements, intrinsic and extrinsic influences in relation to the dropout decision making, as well as observing reactions and body language.

4.4.5. Secondary data

An analysis of statistical information (secondary data) dealing with the higher education system situation in Panama (i.e., registration, graduation and dropout data) provided by Contraloria de la Republica de Panama, Sistema de Indicadores con Enfoque de Género de Panamá (SIEGPA) and Instituto Nacional de Estadistica y Censo (INEC) was done to present

several statistics since data from universities in Panama City were scarce and unable to be acquired due to their sensitivity.

4.5.   **Analysis procedures**

According to Glesne (2006), data analysis is a long process that:

> "…involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with data, you describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and link your story to other stories. To do so, you must categorize, synthesize, search patterns and interpret patterns you have collected" (p. 147).

The analysis of all data collected during this study follows the general steps of qualitative data analysis described by Creswell (2009) (figure 9).
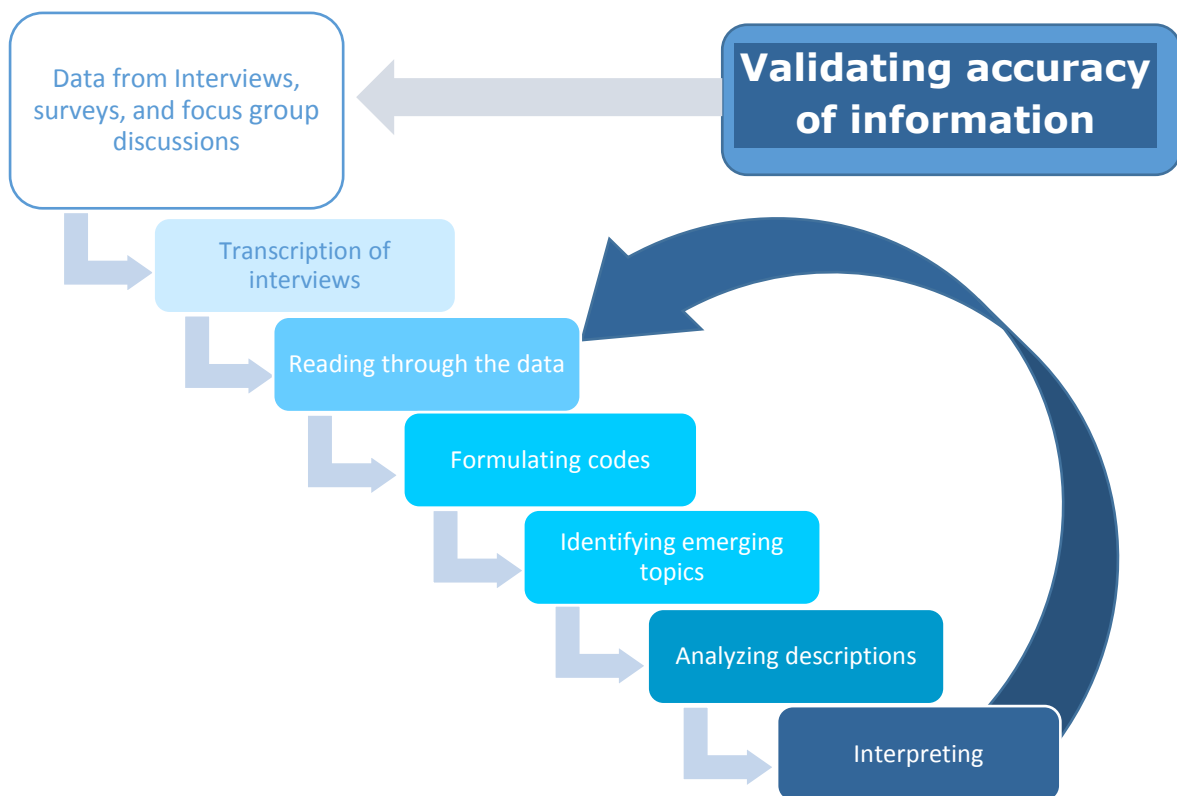
Figure 10. Steps for qualitative data analysis. Adapted from Creswell, (2009).

I started the coding process by identifying preliminary topics and ideas. As I read each transcript in detail, I proceeded to make a list of codes in

reference to all the aspects mentioned during the interview. This resulted in a list of consistent topics that later turned into codes, highlighted along all interviews. Later, several sub-code lists emerged. I repeated this process in order to refine the list and find even more details concerning socio-cultural matters related to dropout and personal development.

Data obtained from participants during semi-structured interviews were first analyzed using the program Atlas.ti[77] and included the following steps:

- The analysis of the sample demographic data.
- The analysis and coding of variables obtained from the interviews with participants in order to list factors and determine the existence of practices that influence the participants' decisions to drop out and their personal development after dropping out.
- The analysis and coding of data from the focused group discussions in order to find out the observed reasons for dropping out from university studies and community practices.
- The analysis of personal narratives to explain in detail what the outcomes from the dropout decision can be.

Lastly, the data were validated by analyzing once more to find patterns that were connected to the three main topics (figure 10).
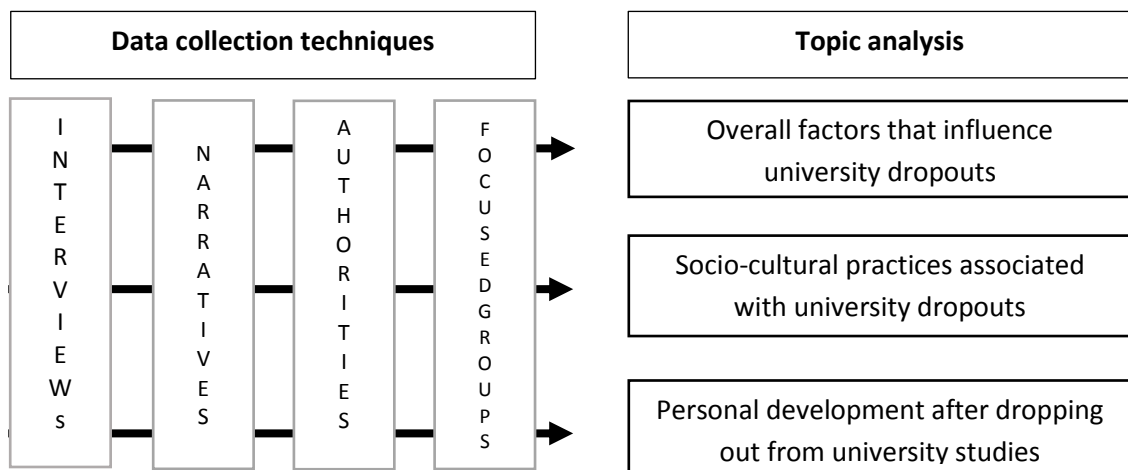
Figure 11. Validating topic analysis. Source: author

4.6. Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of any qualitative research is grounded on four components as stated by Lincoln & Guba (1985) - confirmability, credibility, transferability and dependability.

The confirmability of this study is ensured by giving a thorough and transparent description of the data collection process and analysis.

The study's credibility is ensured by triangulating the data gathered from the multiple data sources with interpretation provided by the research methods used. By using triangulation, I was able to provide different perspectives of the dropout phenomenon as perceived by the study participants, university authorities and staff. Transferability was ensured by giving a detailed description of the historical background and dominant assumptions in regard to the researched topic.

Dependability was ensured by following steps during the methodology procedure at the moment of data collection. Also, during the interviews with participants, I repeated their responses to confirm that my understanding was clear and otherwise clarified. The recorded interviews were transcribed by my assistant but carefully reviewed (i.e. listened to) while rereading the transcript. To decrease any possibility of bias, I reviewed other studies related to university dropouts and dropouts in general in Panama and other countries.

4.7. Positionality statement

According to England (1994), research expresses what the researcher and the research participants experience in a shared plot. The uniqueness of all their characters, perceptions and biases have a potential impact in the research process. It is the recognition of these aspects that will help us to approach the phenomenon and participants in the study and shape the process accordingly.

I am currently a research fellow at ZEF[78], a German research institute that promotes opening doors through new perspectives on sustainable development. But my path here was not a straight line.

I was born and raised in the capital city of the capital province of the Republic of Panama. I am a metropolitan citizen. My parents were both professionals, the first professionals of their family. My mother was an architect and my father an accountant. Therefore, I was expected to attend university just like most of my student acquaintances and become a professional too.

During my many years at university, I had firsthand experience on what being a dropout can mean and feel like. At the age of 18, I was already a dropout from my first year at the University of Panama. I dropped out because I sensed that something was wrong, something was not working between me and the university. I chose to study business administration but couldn't see myself studying an administrative program which did not correspond well with my skills.

Later on, I chose another program and continued my university studies only to drop out again after three years. Afterwards, however, the situation was different. I was a little older with a permanent job and had other priorities in my life. Fortunately, there was no third strike. For the third time I registered at university in the Humanities Department to pursue a language teacher program taught during the night shift. After two breaks during the program, I succeeded at graduating.

Later on, as an English teacher I had the opportunity to work with high school and adult students. I worked in several ESL projects and most recently I worked eight years at a government facility for adult vocational learning.

Looking back at this long path to success has given me the chance to reflect on what university students experience while trying to get through their studies. I know how difficult it was for a prospective university freshman to get accurate information on programs and institutional procedures, and how personal situations can become obstacles to university life.

While working at a government vocational facility for ten years I had the opportunity to give advice to many of my students on defining their goals and what was needed to accomplish them. I also reflected on how priorities

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[78] Zentrum fur Entwickulgsforschung [Centro para estudios de desarrollo]

in life change and how conforming to the masses is not important as long as you are satisfied and feel successful.

In the last decade, I have witnessed a large number of former university students attending vocational courses in order to get trained in a particular subject with the intent to avoid attending university in order to succeed in the labor market. Out of curiosity, I started asking these students the reasons for dropping out in order to better understand the problem. At that time, I believed it was because these students had poor high school preparation. Today, I understand that there are so many other causes for dropout. Yet, there are not so many studies about it in Panama.

Qualitative research may always be at risk of being influenced by the researcher's background experiences as an insider. In agreement with Machi and McEvoy (2016), in qualitative research, there is a strong possibility that the identity of both researcher and participants influence the research process, especially when the researcher has experienced similar situations in the past.

In this study, I am an *insider researcher*. As a Panamanian citizen and a language teacher, I also share a common language and understanding of the issues associated with the dropout phenomenon. Also, because I attended one of the public universities in Panama City and later dropped out from my studies, I offer a sense of legitimacy and experiential basis with regard to the studied phenomenon. Thus, being an insider researcher also allows me to have a perspective that shows sympathy, identification and understanding of the topics and the circumstances involved in it without losing academic objectivity. Additionally, being an insider can help me as a researcher with study participants in terms of being more open to their feelings and perceptions (Asselin, 2003).

I understand the implications of acting as an insider researcher but I also recognize that being an outsider researcher may not always best allow one to portray the convictions among people that share an identity. An outsider researcher might draw upon theories, methods and other assumptions from the world of academic inquiry (Herling, 2016) or Western academia, which may sometimes differ to real circumstances of the targeted environment because of established preconceptions.

Studying university dropouts in Panama requires the acknowledgement of my own positionality towards the phenomenon. Besides, as a Panamanian, I also acknowledge my political and ideological assumptions on race and gender towards university education (Carter, Lapum, Lavallée & Martin,

2014). Consequently, I put together my background as a university student and my experience as a teacher of adult learners and acknowledge that I am biased towards the belief that university may not be for everyone and it is not a requirement for success. This bias has the potential impact of limiting the effectiveness of my research but not its value since it presents a different perspective not yet covered in the Panamanian educational context.

5. **CHAPTER   Dropping out, a major decision.**

In this chapter, I refer to factors involved in the dropout decision process. In the next chapter, chapter 6, I attempt to provide insights into socio-cultural practices affecting their decision-making, while the respondents explain their own particular situations. In chapter 7, I uncover possible personal development effects of dropping out.

The responses generated by the semi-structured interviews revealed several critical topics. As a result, interviewees' reasons for dropping out were connected to:

- general aspects of their lives,
- the education system structure in contrast with institutional support and orientation,
- community practices as an influence in the dropout decision, and
- personal development after dropping out of university.

I first interviewed former dropouts. Then, I interviewed community members which included friends, family and neighbors of the former dropouts. Later, I also organized two focus group discussions in order to compare and corroborate the points of view given among all participants since they all live in similar social contexts in Panama. Additionally, experts on higher education and university staff were also interviewed.

As a phenomenological study (Smith, 1996), it was designed to discover the underlying aspects and overlooked issues regarding the dropout phenomenon. I chose to investigate contributing factors directly from the voices of the ones who dropped out and not only from statistics in order to reveal hidden meanings and explore the insights, personal experiences and points of view of the participants, as well as identifying the impact on the lives of those who have dropped out. As Seidman (2006) says, interviews provide a channel to "…understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9).

Throughout chapters 5, 6 and 7, former dropouts, community members, participants of the focus groups, university authorities and staff are quoted in order to provide better understanding of the typical kinds of responses given in reference to certain topics.[79]

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[79] To differentiate all the study interviewees, their quotes will be organized and presented with an assigned code as follows: with the letter "DO" (for dropout), "CM" (for community member, "EXP"

General knowledge of the concepts "dropout", "practices" and "personal development" were assessed for all former dropouts and community members in order to clarify definitions when necessary. Among the answers to what dropout is, most responses included the themes: to finish, leave things without finishing them, abandon, or leave a place. This demonstrated a general knowledge of the concept and allowed me to proceed with the interviews. For those few who were not sure of the definition of any of the concepts, I explained using details and examples prior to continuing with the interview.

5.1.   Understanding what dropout means

Due to its complexity, Tinto (1975) expressed concern on the issues involved in trying to define the term dropout. Yet, Tinto claims that:

> "Despite the very extensive literature on dropout from higher education, much remains unknown about the nature of the dropout process. In large measure, the failure of past research to delineate more clearly the multiple characteristics of dropout can be traced to two major shortcomings: namely, inadequate attention given to questions of definition and to the development of theoretical models that seek to explain, not simply to describe, the processes that bring individuals to leave institutions of higher education" (p. 89).

Later, Orr (1987) defines the word dropout as, "A student who withdraws from school without a high school diploma and without enrolling elsewhere" (p.1). And, Morrow (1987), in his attempt to explain the term dropout, clarifies that the given definitions attached to the reasons for its use. He suggests three criteria that must not be fulfilled for the use of the term: the active enrollment of the student, their transfer to another institution, or the conclusion of studies with an issued diploma.

In fact, there are some problems associated with this term, namely, it differs across contexts and there is no universally agreed definition (Natriello et al., 1990). The term is also somewhat ambiguous since it is not only a noun (a dropout) but commonly used as a verb (to drop out) and

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(for university authorities and staff); followed by a number. (e.g. DO41, for dropout participant #41 or NARR18, as for narrative participant #18)

also an adjective. Moreover, the term cannot be labeled to any particular situation since the person who is a dropout or is dropping out will not necessarily remain a dropout forever or may drop out several times during their educational life.

For example, a former dropout can return to their studies after a family situation, illness or pregnancy. In other cases, the person who interrupted their studies may return after getting a better job or improving their economic situation, settling in a new place or starting a new family. In any case, there is a commonly accepted negative connotation to this word that implicates a degree of failure in life.

After many authors attempting to define this term over time, ("dropout" as a noun or "to drop out" as a verb) and having developed a number of different definitions and connotations, most of them negative, being a dropout is more than a withdrawal from studies or academic failure (National Research Council, 2001). According to Kaplan & Luck (1977), it could also be as negative as tagging a person as a failure within the society with unconventional social standards and practices when they say: dropouts is a "self-perpetuating system of poverty and deprivation". (p. 41)

Certainly, a dropout can be perceived as a failure because of the inherent abandonment of something. Contrastingly, it can also be seen as a step prior to achievement. On the other hand, having dropped out because of other ambitions may be considered just as good as continuing one's studies. How dropout is perceived all depends on the interpretation of the dropout or the observers because their interests may differ (Tinto, 1982).

There is an absence of a single accepted definition and a variety of interpretations and contexts in which this term can be used. In relation to education, it can be said that the act of dropping out is an interruption of an educational cycle with the purpose of not completing it; which includes different categories such as formal education and other educational activities and courses (Yokozeki, 1997).

Therefore, for the purpose of researching the dropout phenomenon in universities in Panama City, I will use the following definition: A dropout is a student who has decided to interrupt their university studies and will not return to finish them.

5.2. **Factors that affect university students**

During this study, former dropouts were asked about their personal reasons for dropping out and reasons for which other university students drop out according to their observations. Former dropouts shared their personal reasons for dropping out and a variety of perspectives on daily life factors that drove them to take their decisions to leave university.

Twenty general reasons for dropping out from university were provided, including the most prevalent reason - economic issues such as low income or unemployment. This finding corroborates previous research on the topic (Martin, 1994; Castaño et al., 2008; Calderon, 2013). Other reasons included a general lack of interest, family matters, lack of motivation, commitment and social pressure.

People in general dropout from their studies because of many factors that can be different to the previous presented. These factors may also differ depending on the age of the student, location within the country, family background, social class and even moment in time. In Panama, research about these factors is scarce and there is a belief, that the greatest reason for dropping out from studies is because economic issues. However, the analysis of the process of dropping out revealed that many different situations can play a role and the decision is multicausal.

Former dropouts were asked about how personal situations affected their ability to continue with their university studies. In most cases, they directly started into stories including different factors that had effect on their continuation of their university studies. Factors mentioned the most were financial issues (62%), family situations (38%), job related issues (32%), and issues related to distances and transportation problems (20%), which will be explored in this section. Other less prominent factors for dropping out were lack of maturity and discipline (6%), health related (8%), and program choice and lack of orientation (18%).

Therefore, I gathered a list of different categories of factors that influenced university students' decision to drop out, based on interviews with former dropouts and community members (table 13).

Comparison of factors associated with university dropout	
Former dropouts	**Community members**
Financial issues	Financial issues
Employment	Employment/lack of
Job flexibility/time	Time/priorities
Debt/expenses	
Educational opportunities/scholarships	Opportunities/politics
Program expectations/orientation	
Program length/cost	
Institutional issues	
Level of preparation/knowledge	Prior preparation
Family	Family
Health issues/drugs	
Transportation/long distances	Distances/transportation
Lack of security/safety	Safety/lack of
Lack of Interest/motivation/responsibility	Motivation for success at home/community
Social pressure/common beliefs	Social pressure/gangs/crime
Incidental events	
	Gender/faith
Media and entertainment	Lack of entertainment/sports

Table 12. Comparison of general factors associated with university dropout as identified by former dropouts and community members.

Within this comparison, it is shown that although community members, out of their observations, have some opinions that match with the actual reasons for the students' dropout but they do not take into account factors such as debt, career length and expectations, health issues, incidental events and media as coadjutants to dropping out.

Factors such as maturity and discipline, university administration and costs, career choice, personal or family health related issues and crime were mentioned by the interviewees and later categorized within the following lists as factors that affect Panamanian students' decision to drop out their studies. The following list provides a comparison between experiences from the subjects of the research and the observers' opinions, but in order of importance (table 14). The order of importance was presented as how many times the interviewees mentioned the factor (hits) as a factor that influences university students to drop out.

	Factors associated to university dropout in order of importance	
Rank	Former dropouts	Community members
1	Financial issues	Social pressure/gangs/crime
2	Employment	Time/priorities
3	Job flexibility/time	Distances/transportation
4	Debt/expenses	Opportunities/politics/media
5	Education opportunities/scholarships	Family (Husband-wife, kids)
6	Career expectations/ orientation/ offer	Motivation for success at home/community
7	Career length/cost	Financial issues
8	Institutional issues	Safety/lack of
9	Level of preparation/knowledge	Gender/faith related
10	Family (Husband, wife, kids)	Employment/lack of
11	Health issues/drugs	Entertainment/Sports/lack of
12	Transportation/long distances	Preparation
13	Lack of security/safety	Social pressure/gangs/crime
14	Lack of Interest/motivation/responsibility	
15	Social pressure/common beliefs	
16	Incidental events	
17	Media	

Table 13. General factors associated to university dropout in order of importance.

Among other factors connected to university dropouts, interviewees commented on what they have observed through the years as follow:

- One community member addressed political turnover as an event that is experienced every five years, particularly by those who are government employees. Every five years Panamanians vote for a new president, district representatives and representatives of corregimientos. Also, ministers change as there is a predominant party ruling. For this reason, there are a lot of layoffs among government employees with the hiring of new personnel. The community member attests to this as follow:

   [When there is a change of government there is usually always a lot of dismissal of public officials. And when they are out of work, they do not have the purchasing power to pay for those studies from private and public universities. That influences a lot when it comes to being able to continue with some studies. The political issue influences the entire government and all citizens because there is a change of positions. As they enter,

others leave] (CM07, personal communication, June 4, 2016).[80]

Therefore, there is a strong incidence of student dropout during election years because many of them are supported by their parents or relatives. Unfortunately, due to the lack of statistics on university dropouts, there is no way to prove this.

- There is a lack of engagement among prospective students on their desires and goals. This engagement and motivation should be provided not only by their parents or other family members but also by community authorities and even the church in order to produce a chain reaction towards the community integral and social progress. One community member voices his concerns:

  [What is really needed in the neighborhood is that the neighborhood politicians and private companies get involved a lot more, because they make promises but do not comply. The private enterprise all they want is for them, but they do not invest in the corregimiento. ...if the government does not get involved and the private company does not get involved with the students we're not going anywhere] (CM03, personal communication, June 10, 2016).[81]

- There is also a lack of orientation from schools toward clear goals, careers and opportunities for the prospective students. As a consequence, students drop out from university, as observed by a community member:

  [...offering greater options so that the University is not necessarily the only option; that more alternatives are known such as vocational schools that many students do not know and others do not see as a valid way to climb on the social ladder. It's that the university studies are overrated here.

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[80]   Original in Spanish: *"Cuando hay cambio de Gobierno hay siempre muchos despidos de funcionarios públicos. Y al quedar sin trabajo, no tienen el poder adquisitivo para poder pagar esos estudios de las universidades privadas y públicas. Eso influye mucho a la hora de poder continuar con unos estudios. El tema político influye a todo el Gobierno y a todos los ciudadanos porque hay cambio de posiciones. Así como entran, salen."*

[81] Original in Spanish: *"Realmente lo que se necesita en el barrio es que se involucren mucho más los políticos del barrio y las empresas privadas, porque ellos hacen promesas pero no cumplen. La empresa privada ellos todos lo que quieren es para ellos, pero ellos no invierten en lo que es el corregimiento. … si el Gobierno no se involucra y la empresa privada no se involucra con los estudiantes no vamos para ningún lado."*

Without a university degree many young people think that they cannot achieve what they are looking for, when in reality it should not be that way] (CM05, personal communication, June 21, 2016).[82]

- Bullying and peer pressure also affect these students. In some neighborhoods gangs try to own peoples' lives, depriving them of the opportunity to study. In other cases, social pressure from friends and neighbors who pursue other pathways different to studying such as gambling, partying or acquiring illegal earnings. Also, the term "nerd"[83] is used to exert pressure on a person to not study since the term has a negative connotation among young people.

- In communities where poverty is severe, predominant factors for general dropout are early pregnancy (Hofferth, Reid, & Mott, 2001), lack of orientation and lack of employment. Also, the idea that attending elementary school is enough schooling is prevalent.

- Some students struggle with the length and cost of programs. A former dropout makes a comparison: [We like the National (Universidad de Panama), but it takes too long. We would like the private one because it is shorter, but it is very expensive. So we do not access this one thing and we do not access the other ...] (DO07, female HR assistant, personal communication, June 22, 2016).[84] This is a very common thought from university freshmen as they would like to attend private universities not only for the shorter length but also because they may be easier to access, have more modern infrastructure, allow for shifts and course flexibility and also are seen positively and thus appeal to social status. Also, there is a general idea among some university students that the public universities only teach theory and there is no opportunity for practice.

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[82] Original in Spanish: "*…ofreciéndole mayores opciones para que la Universidad no sea necesariamente la única opción. Que se den a conocer más otras alternativas como las escuelas vocacionales que muchísimos estudiantes pues la desconocen y otros no la ven como una manera válida, esto de superar y de escalar la escala social. Es que los estudios universitarios están sobrevalorados aquí. Sin un diploma universitario muchos jóvenes piensan que no pueden lograr eso que ellos buscan, cuando en realidad no debe ser de esa forma.*"

[83] If you say that someone is a nerd, you mean that they are stupid or ridiculous, especially because they wear unfashionable clothes or show too much interest in computers or science. www.collinsdictionary.com

[84] Original in Spanish: "*Nos gusta la Nacional, pero es muy larga. Quisiéramos la privada por más corta, pero es muy cara. Entonces no accesamos a esta por una cosa y no accesamos a lo otra.*"

There are so many factors that can be related to university dropout. However, every person has a different perspective on this topic. From the different perspectives of all the interviewees, I will now provide a more detailed analysis of these factors.

5.2.1.Financial issues

As stated in previous studies on university dropout (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, et al., 1992; Diaz Peralta, 2008), as life goes on and economies fluctuate, university students may be affected by financial issues. Students were affected during the decade of 2001-2010 when there was increasing inflation that kept growing with every government period. These financial issues can be related to a job situation, an unexpected decrease of cash flow, an increase of study expenses or the simple issue of socio-economic class.

Previous studies (Rumberger, 2011; Quinn, 2004) show the effect social class, in relation to family income levels, has on school dropouts. However, in higher education the focus is different. During school, parents or sometimes extended families contribute to a child's tuition. On the other hand, while this family support may still happen with university students, as young adults they become subjects to the class they are assigned because of their family's class and income, their personal situation and even their employment status.

During the former dropout interviews in this study, the most commented reason given for dropping out was due to financial issues. Sixty-two percent of the former dropouts' alleged that financial issues are the first reason for other university students to drop out. Of these former dropouts, 30% confessed that this was the primary cause in their case. A former dropout commented on his experience:

> [Why did you leave the University? Financial problems, my dad at that time was left without work, there was no other person to go out and take care of the house, so I had to concentrate on finding work to support the house] (DO31, married male manager, personal communication, June 29, 2016).[85]

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[85] Original in Spanish: "*Por qué razón te saliste de la Universidad? …Problemas económicos, mi papá en ese momento se quedó sin trabajo, no había otra persona que saliera a hacerse cargo de la casa, así que me tocó concentrarme en buscar trabajo para sostener la casa.*"

In the case of this former dropout, financial issues were merely family and personal finances. But, in other cases, financial issues are connected to other types of responsibilities.

> [And why did you leave the University? Well actually I did not leave, but I had the painful need to stop studying, because my stepfather had a supermarket business. When one early morning he came from the warehouse he had a traffic accident with an uncle of mine and the supermarket had no one to manage it. So I had to stop studying to come to take care of the business it was very difficult for me to run a business] (DO33, male driver, personal communication, June 29, 2016).[86]

Financial issues were also related to family difficulties in terms of getting married, having a new child born and moving to a new home with or without their parents, as these become priorities in life and expenses increase. Moreover, the financial factor was not only referred to as an outcome of family difficulties but also in regard to the increasing cost of living for Panamanians including rent, transportation, and food allowance[87], on top of university costs.[88]

CINDA[89] (2011) stated that the opportunities of student enrollment at universities in Latin America are conditioned to the socioeconomic origin of the student. In the case of this particular research, 30% of the dropout participants alleged that during their university studies, they struggled with their financial situation. This was the case no matter whether they were supported by their parents, self-employed, the only person working at home or just having to choose between working and studying.

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[86] Original in Spanish: "*Y por qué te saliste de la Universidad? Bueno en realidad no me salí, sino que tuve la penosa necesidad de dejar de estudiar, porque mi padrastro tenía un negocio de un supermercado. Cuando una madrugada venía del abasto tuvo un accidente de tránsito con un tío mío y el mini súper no tenía quien lo atendiera. Entonces yo tuve que dejar de estudiar para venir a hacerme cargo del negocio se me hacía muy difícil atender un negocio.*"

[87] CBA, Canasta Basica Alimenticia or Canasta Basica Familiar. According to the international definition of the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP), it consists of a set of basic products of the usual diet of the population, in sufficient quantities to meet the energy needs of every average individual. It tries to reflect the tastes and food preferences of households. Retrieved from mef.gob.pa

[88] University costs does not only accounts for registration fees but all expenses related to attending university such as transportation, books, copies and daily nourishment.

[89] Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo.

Concerning job related issues, 32% of the dropout participants also said that things like long schedules and type of job (i.e. first job, entry level jobs, and minimum wage jobs) affected their decision to drop out; which agrees with Rivera Rearte et al. (2006) claims on students unable to cope with university studies after having to get a job for their family subsistence. On this matter, a female participant from focus group #1 commented:

> [...then if you went to work in a clothing store like me, I worked almost five years in a store. They did not give you the opportunity to study. Sometimes parents also have nothing more than a single budget, nothing more] (FG1, personal communication, April 27, 2017).[90]

This focus group participant also references that she has to work in any case, since there is only one salary at home. Therefore, the only way to cover her expenses, and maybe help with her family's income, is by getting a job. Entry level jobs as in shops and fast food franchises are easy paths for those who have no academic background since these places do not require technical education. However, the negative aspect that is that most of these places do not offer flexibility in their schedules. Thus, one is unable to register for any available shift at the university; not even Saturdays.

5.2.2. Family situations

According to O'Connell, Boat & Warner (2009), young people[91] develop in the contexts of their family, their community, where they study, and the larger culture in their surrounding environment. Different circumstances in our environment can affect a family member or the family as a whole, both immediate family or extended family. These circumstances, can range from a parent losing a job, having an ill relative, receiving a new member in the family, or parents divorcing. The perception of these circumstances can lead to different reactions that can greatly alter plans.

The first and most addressed family situation that was found to influence the dropout decision was pregnancy. Twenty percent of the former dropout interviewees believed that unwanted or unplanned pregnancies were crucial

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[90] Original in Spanish: "…*entonces si te metías a trabajar en un almacén como yo, que trabajé casi cinco años en un almacén. No te daban oportunidad para estudiar. A veces también los padres nada más tienen un solo presupuesto, nada más.*"

[91] Up to the age of 25, according to the authors.

factors contributing to dropping out in general. Eight percent of the former dropouts in this study declared that they dropped out because of pregnancy. A former dropout stated: ["An unplanned pregnancy; things that force the young person to look for a job and truncates their studies"] (DO-17, male legal assistant, personal communication, June 21, 2016).[92]. Although this interviewee is a man, we can appreciate how he refers to unwanted pregnancy, which exemplifies what Moreno Torres et al. (2013) claim on university students that become parents and acquire family responsibilities.

Five of the eleven community members and one expert alleged that pregnancies are a determinant regarding dropouts in both women and men. Dr. Calderon also corroborates the previous quote, ["…pregnancy not only affected the woman, but the man who had a pregnant woman who was not studying, but still had to go to work, his family sacrifice..."] (Dr. Calderon, personal communication, April 12, 2017).[93] However, out of twenty six female former dropouts interviewed for this study, five got pregnant during their university studies. Of these five, four of them said was their first pregnancy and two of them had complications that led to health issues making it impossible for them to continue. All of these five women said that they had plans to continue and finish their studies.

Indeed, not all women who become pregnant leave university, and others, after taking time off, resume their academic activities while combining their role as mothers and students. Interviewees who got pregnant during their university studies were probably exposed to an unplanned pregnancy at an inconvenient time in life when they were neither mentally prepared nor had enough financial resources to face the situation as a new parent (Moreno Torres et al., 2013). Thus, pregnancy can considerably affect future personal and social development when postponing academic plans and modifying professional trajectories.

Along with pregnancy, the fact of merely having a family and the inherent sacrifices were also discussed. For some university students, having a family means choosing between studying and getting a job. Sometimes, the decision is about family financial support, other times it relates to family

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[92] Original in Spanish: *"Un embarazo no planificado, cosas que obligan al joven a buscar un trabajo y trunca sus estudios."*

[93] Original in Spanish: *"El embarazo no solo afectaba a la mujer, sino al hombre que tenía mujer embarazada que no estaba estudiando, pero igual tenía que ir a trabajar, su sacrificio familiar…"*

disintegration (divorce or separation) for not coping with the family's demands (Spady, 1970; Bernal, 2001; Rivera Rearte et al. 2006).

Regarding family situations, 38% of the former dropouts stated that they abandoned their studies because they had family obligations such as taking care of another member of the family or relative, or due to influencing opinions among family members. For example, a former dropout comments on his experience:

> [I left because at that time, as it was private university and I did not have a formal job, I was just a packer, I had to dedicate more time to work or for economic reasons I could say. Well the truth (is), I do not receive support from anyone, because as a child my mom fell ill and that's why I took the reins, to start working at a supermarket as a packer and that's how I fought] (DO16, male manager, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[94]

This former dropout explained not only the direct cause for him to drop out but also a very personal facet of his life, taking care of one parent and also being the economic support for his family. This exemplifies what Carvajal & Cervantes (2018) claim on students that have to take responsibilities that derive from their role in the family.

5.2.3. Job, distances and transportation

As previously stated in Chapter 2, mobility is a crucial element to students attending university in Panama City. In the case of this study, distances and transportation have a strong influence on university students' decisions. In fact, 20% of the former dropout participants in this study referred to transportation problems and very long distances between the job place, the university and their homes as a determinant factor that influenced them to leave their university studies.

Panamanians that just reached their adult age[95] are legally able to start working right away after graduating from high school. Most of them,

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[94] Original in Spanish: *"Me salí porque en ese entonces como era privada y no tenía un trabajo formal sino que era simplemente empacador, tenía que dedicarle más tiempo al trabajo o por cuestiones económicas pudiera decir. Bueno la verdad, yo no recibo apoyo de nadie, porque de pequeño mi mamá cayó enferma y por eso fue que tomé las riendas, bueno de entrar en un Súper como empacador y de ahí he luchado."*

[95] 18 years old.

inexperienced youth, start to work at shops or in places that offer rotating shifts and a minimum salary. Working in these kinds of jobs can be a means of financial survival, including the possibility of being able to pay for night classes at university. But studying at night has its disadvantages related to transportation. Depending on the distance to university, the student may face problem to get public transportation since university night shifts tend to end after 10 pm.

Besides, while the city expands into new neighborhoods, new families or individuals that make a financial effort to invest and move into new houses to establish themselves (Henderschott, 1989) are affected by distances and transportation matters. Thus, as Panama City expands, this problem takes on new dimensions.

Transportation problems are most likely to occur because of the long distances between home, place of work and university, because of lack of security at early morning or late night and also for heavy traffic. For this reason, university students are more likely to drop out because of the lack of time for studying due to all the time lost trying to get from one location to the other, as reported by previous research (Ersing, Sutphen, & Loffler, 2009; South, Haynie & Bose, 2007). In this respect, a former dropout said:

> […most of them have not finished. I can tell you, the distance, we are far from the university and we travel long distances, we leave very early and we return late because of the traffic, so that prevents us from finishing…] (DO38, married female accountant, personal communication, July 2, 2017).[96]

This woman expresses her concern about distances that she cannot avoid and according to her are the cause of many university dropouts. Another interviewee, a community member, explained:

> ["... the closest options are the private options, not the public ones. So they imply a cost that forces the vast majority to work to pay for their studies. That is not so easy because their work schedule coincides with the class schedule, so on the one hand, and on the other hand is time. A student who works

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[96]   Original in Spanish: "*…la mayoría de ellos no han concluido. Que te puedo decir la distancia, estamos distantes de la Universidad y viajamos larga distancia, salimos muy temprano y regresamos tarde por el tráfico, entonces eso nos impide terminar.*"

eight hours and goes to university for five hours; the time they have to dedicate to their studies is minimal"] (CM05, university professor, personal communication, 4/6/2016).[97]

For this professor, the situation is as simple as a summation of active hours during the day. He also shows his concern about the time the student is supposedly investing in homework or other assignments, which is not possible.

In both focus group discussions the participants also explained that depending on where they lived, the priorities in life, including education, were different. As an example, those who used to live in indigenous reservations were able to attend elementary school, while some of them attended junior high school and only a select few attended high school because of the distances and lack of facilities. They also commented that there is a common belief that those who live in the countryside near major cities are able to attend high school but, that any person who lives in the capital city is able to attend university. However, the situation is more complex because of transportation difficulties and distances present even in the most urban parts of the city.

Also related to transportation, other community members refer to personal security issues while trying to get from university to their homes late at night. In his study, DeVries (2013) reports on living on campus or not as a factor that has an effect on the decision to drop out. In Panama, there are no on-campus dormitories and most students must travel as most campuses are in the city center. Because of this, one community member, explains that some people living in communities far from university or those attending the night shift at university drop out despite the hope that a new neighborhood may change things:

[...there are some of them that I have heard. They say that when they move from this neighborhood to a new one, they are going to go back to the university. But as long as they are living in this neighborhood, it is impossible for them to attend the university, because they have already been robbed and

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[97] Original in Spanish: "*…las opciones más cercanas son las opciones privadas, no las públicas. Entonces implican un costo que los obliga a la gran mayoría laborar para pagarse sus estudios eso no es tan fácil porque el horario de trabajo coincide con el horario de las clases, entonces por una parte y por otra parte pues el tiempo, un estudiante que trabaje ocho horas y vaya a la Universidad por cinco pues el tiempo que tiene para ahondar en sus estudios es casi mínimo.*"

people have been killed and many dropout] (CM03, personal communication, 10/6/2016).[98]

This particular comment referred to those who had moved to better neighborhoods seeking better lives. They move to a better environment but then struggle with traffic jams and distances as an obstacle to attending university, considering that new neighborhoods are built farther from the city center as the city expands.

Additionally, having classes at late night hours, mostly until 10:30 pm, and having transportation problems and security issues on their way home was also a great concern among the focus group discussion participants. The lack of security at night and the increasing crime rates affect those who work during the day and those others who, with a lot of sacrifice, attend university in the night shift. In this case, it contrasts with what Turkey & Harknett (2010) said about safety nets in families with residential stability in their communities. Here, safety issues or attacks occur not only by those closeby but also by unknown individuals from the same community.

And this situation is not only at night. Those who attend classes in the morning and live far from their university can also be affected since they need to start their journey while it is still dark. Due to long distances and work schedules, student performance and class attendance are also severely affected to the point of dropping out from university, as expressed by a participant in focus group discussion #1:

> [...with how difficult it is to have access to the university wave and now the insecurity issue in the streets, sometimes many students have to stop attending some courses; because if they did not, they would arrive at (their) houses too late, exposing themselves to the existing criminality in the streets] (FG01, personal communication, 27/4/2017).[99]

The former dropout interviewees triangulate this finding, as 20% express fear of being robbed or other personal safety issues while travelling too

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[98] Original in Spanish: *"…hay algunos que yo he escuchado que dicen que cuando ellos se muden de este barrio, ellos van a hacer sus papeles para volver nuevamente a la Universidad, pero siempre y cuando están viviendo en este barrio, es imposible que ellos asistan a la Universidad, porque ya le han robado y han asesinado y muchos se salen."*

[99] Original in Spanish: *"…con lo difícil que es el tener acceso a la ola universitaria como por el asunto como la inseguridad en las calles, a veces muchos estudiantes tienen que dejar de asistir a algunos cursos, porque de hacerlo llegarían a las casas demasiado tarde exponiéndose pues a la criminalidad que existe en las calles."*

early in the morning or too late at night while trying to reach commuting to and from university. Also, those who live on the outskirts of the city have the disadvantage of experiencing traffic jams not just at peak hours but at any time of day (Calderon Pimentel, 2013). For this reason, private universities become an alternative to students with transportation problems although these universities are not as centrally located as the public ones and surpass public one in number. However, often they must get a job in order to afford to go to the nearby private universities, which involve greater costs and other hurdles.

Transportation problems affect not only those who experience residential mobility due to life status enhancement or because of building a new family but also those with a stable household.

5.2.4. Institutional factors

During the interviews and focus group discussions, participants commented on the lack of proper orientation about programs, procedures, and payments. It was clear that some did not receive any kind of orientation at all prior to enrolling at university and this was, in their opinion, connected to the dropout phenomenon. This lack of orientation can be divided into 2 elements:

- General orientation, which is provided by personal searches, their relatives, acquaintances or the media and
- Institutional orientation, which is provided by school counselors or teachers and during university orientation days.

Former dropout interviewees also commented on the lack of care shown by university staff towards helping students know which career they should pursue (Braxton et al., 1987; Diaz Peralta, 2008), why it is important for them and what benefits they will get in the future. This issue was mostly said to be experienced at public universities where the students' first step into the registration process is to take one to three entrance tests, including a general knowledge test and a psychological test.

The general knowledge test provided by public universities in Panama is one in which they are evaluated on three fundamental areas of cognitive development, with logical-mathematical reasoning being the most important. The psychological or psychometric test is not a knowledge test but rather concentrates on what the student is able to do with the previous

knowledge acquired in their school years. The tests are applied with the aim of providing the student with three potential career choices according to his or her abilities. These choices are not obligatory. In private institutions there is no requirement for any kind of test prior to registration but prospective students can schedule an appointment with university staff to discuss their career choices prior to registering.

The topic of motivational issues also arose among former dropouts. One community member alleged that there is a serious absenteeism issue among university professors. She criticized the amount of errors in the grading system, with assignments that usually take months to get corrected. She also complained about the amount of paperwork and time it takes every semester to get registered. This situation was also commented by another former dropout: ["Tiredness. The few who are in the race, when they encounter a slight obstacle in their program, it already takes away the emotion and they lose the perspective of what they were initiating"] (DO36, married male driver, personal communication, June 29, 2016).[100]

Certainly, institutional criticisms show that motivation is a latent coadjutant towards student retention (Giron & Gonzalez, 2005). Other former dropouts also commented on how helpful it would have been having a person available to consult with enough institutional knowledge of policies and general information about programs to clear all their doubts about the next stage of their studies. This person, as part of the university staff, is seen as an advantage for any prospective student because of the ease of access to accurate information on programs, procedures and other institutional matters.

5.2.5. The media, values and gender

I remember that during my childhood there were TV and radio advertisements that encouraged children to save money in a bank, sleep early in order to be prepared for school the next day, and even one singing the names of the provinces which helped children learn about their country's political division at an early age. For this, I am convinced that the

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[100] Original in Spanish: *"El cansancio. Los pocos que se encuentran dentro de la carrera, cuando se encuentran un tropiezo, un desaire dentro de su carrera ya se va quitando la emoción y ya pierden la perspectiva de lo que estaban iniciando."*

media itself is not the problem. The problem is the lack of interest the media has in promoting human development.

Nowadays, social media takes plays an important role in our lives. Although social media can become a source of distraction to students in general, in this study, it was not addressed as a factor that directly influences students to drop out.

However, mass media and its influence on audience appear to be more connected to students deciding to drop out from their studies. The problem also exists in the constant bombardment of product and service consumption promoted by the media in general as claimed by Gerbner et.al. (2002). In this case, the radio, is more to blame as it is more commonly accessed by university students than television. One former dropout explained his concern:

> [The media has a very large influence on society. Yet, the media has been detrimental to society because it does not sell values, it does not sell education. It sells sex, pornography, violence, liquor. So, this affects a lot because it remains in the student's subconscious and they are more concerned with being popular than being smart or being studious] (DO02, married male merchant, personal communication, June 21, 2016).[101]

As explained by this interviewee, mass media helps to create demand for vanity and anti-social behavior that the student will adopt and consume. Cline (1975) comments on this by explaining how the use of imitative learning can influence people's ways of thinking and acting. Prof. Mendez (Personal communication, April 12, 2017), remarked about non-educational TV programs presented on mass media that tend to show programs with fictitious and idealistic ways of living that any young person (as a student) with a lack of values can believe is the correct path to follow instead of studying and working hard to get a better life. In the Panamanian context, television or television programs are seldom used as a means or tool for educational purposes.

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[101] Original in Spanish: *"Los medios de comunicación tienen una influencia muy grande en la sociedad. Sin embargo, los medios de comunicación han ido en detrimento a la sociedad, porque no venden valores, no venden educación; venden sexo, pornografía, violencia, venden licor. Entonces, esto afecta mucho porque queda en el subconsciente del estudiante y se preocupa más por ser popular que por ser inteligente o por ser estudioso."*

On this same matter, Mr. Joseph concurs with Cline (1975) and replies to this problem on the importance of using the mass media to educate: "Education is one of the important parts; entertain, educate and inform. What we are doing is marketing, without informing. They market tremendously, but don't educate, and education is lacking" (Personal communication, April 17, 2017).[102] Mr. Joseph not only refers to television programs but also radio programs which, according to him, appear to be of great interest to university students as they access them on their cellphones on a daily basis.

According to focus group #1 participants, there are no messages in our TV programs or advertisements stimulating young people to study. Nowadays, education is tremendously marketed but not inculcated. The invitation to young people not to concentrate on their studies, but to look for the quick formula to obtain spending money has promoted a consumerism culture which is tied to popularity. Bauman (2007) relates this behavior to the use of the media for its promotion; directly as commercial advertisements do and indirectly by TV shows or series.

During focus group discussion #1, the powerful influence of the media on young people's decisions was also considered. One participant analyzed his concern and inquired about the opinions of the other participants on the topic of not receiving good input from the media regarding studying or on how to grow as a person and the issue of using the image of "ideal" women to sell. He not only pointed out the use of the female image to sell addicting or bad habits but also the lack of censorship for children in the media. In particular, he criticized the scheduling in which adult TV programs and adult explicit commercial ads are shown in high rating hours instead of showing programs with educational input. To this, Woods (2004) relates the use of the media, in general, to perpetuate sexist and stereotypical opinions and unrealistic images of what is good or bad, right or wrong.

A female focus group participant voiced concern about the negative influence these advertisements and programs have towards children and young adults instead of using them as a means to for positive or productive influence.

> [The media unfortunately today what they bring is party, party, have fun, cool off with Soberana[103], ...the clientelism

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[102] Original in Spanish: *"Educar es una de las partes importantes; entretener, educar e informar. Lo que estamos haciendo es mercadear, sin informar. Se mercadea tremendamente, pero no se educa, y la educación nos está haciendo falta."*
[103] Panamanian beer Brand

that exists today, the offer that there is of women, that is, there is not a commercial in Panama that does not put a woman half-naked to sell a cigarette, a beer, a juice, a car, some clothing, that is everything, everything, everything. The woman is an object of exhibition, no longer there is integrity in the means of communication they are...That is to say that if the media of our country, no longer have a censorship in the schedules to offer a product or to put a commercial, wherever it come from what I'm talking about where they offer beer, what is influencing the student? Even primary school, high school; in the child, in the young person, in the adolescent. What is the influence they have? Both visual and auditory. There is no good influence, what it says is drink, drink, party...It does not say study, if you behave well you are going to be a great professional, study in this place, do this; that, you do not see on television] (FG01, personal communication, April 27, 2017).[104]

Within this conversation, other participants from the same group also criticized topics such as vanity, gender stereotyping and integrity. There is a strong predisposition to women's and men's roles in commercials, which is transmitted on a daily basis in order to appeal to the audience. For example, a boxing match where the protagonist is a male and women are located in the background, with less clothing than usual and advertising a beer brand, a shoes advertisement which offers shoes for school teachers who are only women, a supermarket advertisement were all cashiers are women or an advertisement promoting cigarettes at a party where there is one man and a lot of women, the man being the center of attraction.

In agreement with Bauman (2007), focus group #1 also acknowledged the fact that we Panamanians live immersed in a society tied to consumerism, where children are raised without earning things. Thus, they do not value

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[104] Original in Spanish: "*Los medios de comunicación lastimosamente hoy en día lo que aportan es parranda, fiesta, diviértete, refréscate con Soberana[104],... el clientelismo que hay hoy, el ofrecimiento que hay de la mujer o sea no hay un comercial en Panamá que no ponga a una mujer semidesnuda para poder vender un cigarrillo, una cerveza, un jugo, un carro, la ropa o sea todo, todo, todo. La mujer es un objeto de exhibición, eh ya no hay integridad en los medios de comunicación son... O sea es que si los medios de comunicación de nuestro país, eh ya no tienen una censura en los horarios para ofrecer un producto o para poner un comercial, donde salga eso que te estoy diciendo, donde ofrezcan que la cerveza, ¿En qué está influenciado en el estudiante? Aun de primaria, de secundaria; en el niño, en el joven, en el adolescente ¿Qué es lo que es la influencia que ellos tienen? Tanto visual, como auditiva. No hay una influencia buena, lo que dice es toma, bebe, parrandea... No dice estudia, si te portas bien vas a ser un gran profesional, estudia en este lugar, haz esto, no eso no se ve en la televisión.*"

what is given to them. They do not value the physical things but also opportunities in life, such as rewards from studying. In this sense, mass media has diverted the attributes of having a good life to interests for goods acquisition and popularity.

On another topic, a former dropout pointed out that, most of the time, prospective students fall into marketing strategies designed to target them as business for private universities and not the promotion of the program or content to be learned. He said:

> [The boys all have eyes on wanting to go to these universities, because they are beautiful, they have elevators, they have something, they have auditoriums, they have the television spots and the one who cannot go to that university maybe they don't feel motivated] (NARR01, male cameraman, personal communication, April 25, 2017).[105]

This interviewee also considered the use of the media to transmit unrealistic ideas such as private universities being the best option but at the same time bringing disappointment to those who cannot pay the higher registration fees.

In this sense, he also reflected on the outdated system public universities have and explained that Panamanian higher education institutions need to cope with technological and international standards. For this reason he confesses he believes that studying at private universities in Panama is a better option. As a solution, he concentrates on the need of subsidies from the government to help all university student prospects access to these private universities.

According to Mehraj (2014), mass media, especially television, has an important part as a main supporter to any country's development. In relation to this, Dr. Vallejos de Crespo points out that the government has made several inputs to promote and improve education but with the experience of negative support from the media. She comments on the PISA tests from 2009:

> ["The handling that was also given to the information by the media that are the majority are sensational and have strong effects. I think that the result of the PISA tests should have

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[105] Original in Spanish: *"Los muchachos todos tienen los ojos en que quieren ir a esas Universidades, porque están bonitas, tienen elevadores, tienen no sé qué, tienen auditorios, tienen las cuñas de televisión y el que no puede ir a esa Universidad, tal vez no se sienta motivado."*

created a concern about performance and did not create a concern, rather it created a scandal and a mockery towards the government that was its first step in the interest of improving"] (Personal communication, April 29, 2017).[106]

This expert's opinion supports what Kember (1989) said about the use of the media to promote a country's development. The behavior from the Panamanian mass media institutions is a faithful example of the lack of interest from the media in promoting education at all. Because of the biased interpretation the media gave to the low ranking that the country scored on this test, it became a matter of embarrassment and not seen as a benchmark for future improvements.

Certainly, mass media can give a great input towards education and values. However, the reality is that as a business it should be devoted to what is trending and to the ideas they are supposed to sell to the audience for marketing purposes, being sometimes sexist and projecting wrong ideas on women and men roles in society.

5.2.6. The generational factor

According to the dropout interviewees' demographic data, two distinct generations took part in this study - Generation X, which includes those whose ages are between 39 and 53 years old (in 2019) and Generation Y, which includes those whose ages are between 24 and 38 years old.

During focus group discussion #1, aging was a concern to some of the participants belong to Generation X, stating that the technological revolution has shocked them and created a fear of not coping with the younger generations that attend classes. Participants in this focus group were mostly parents with children who work and own their homes.

According to Putnam (2000), there are different levels of engagement between generations; Generation Y being more disengaged in relation to civic and social interaction. In agreement with this idea, one participant of focus group #1, a young Generation Y female, said that although she had

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[106] Original in Spanish: "El manejo que se le dio también a la información por parte de los medios que son la mayoría son sensacionalistas y afecto bastante. Pienso que el resultado de las pruebas PISA debió haber creado una preocupación del rendimiento y no creyó una preocupación, más bien creo un escándalo y una burla hacia el Gobierno que fue su primer paso en aras de mejorar."

financial issues that were pushing her to drop out from her studies, spending time with influenced her to continue her studies. She reflected on the importance of the people we surround ourselves with in order to see our goals accomplished. And she makes the observation of how detrimental it would have been to surround herself with others of her same age because they never finished university. Her position is consistent with Twenge & Im (2007), in that socio-cultural interaction with older adults changed her views towards the need of social approval or conformity with her own generation.

The young participant continued to explain how immature her classmates were and how this had an effect on her to detracting from her goals and basing her interests on social approval which agrees with what Twenge, et al. (2012) and Hülür, (2017) claim about immaturity as a dropout factor. She described her generation, Generation Y, as lazy and over confident; which is consistent with what Trzesniewski & Donnellan (2010) claimed about millennials not being so eager with the idea of working hard to get what they want.

A female entrepreneur interviewee stated that she always thought about going back to university and that she felt full of emotions and admired all those classmates that finished their programs, but she does not regret having dropped out at all. And, although she belongs to Generation X and acknowledges a conformity behavior within her generation, she also conveys an idea of the following generation (Y). That is, not putting so much effort into studying but rather using alternative ways to achieve goals.

One former dropout commented on his generation, "My generation has a culture of many social events, we like to socialize every weekend, to go to parties with friends, family and that's what it is, isn't it? Get along with each other, meet and socialize, party, meet up" (DO30, single male cameraman, personal communication, June 29, 2016).[107] This interviewee belongs to Generation X and supports the discrepancy explained by Twenge, et al. (2012) with regard to this generation as he conforms to his peers and has a feeling of attachment to his party community.

In their study, Trzesniewski & Donnellan (2010) comment on not only the differences between these two generations but also on the discrepancies and contradictions there are among such generational studies. These may

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[107] Original in Spanish: *"Mi generación tiene una cultura de muchos eventos sociales, eh le gusta socializar todos los fines de semana, andar en fiesta, con amigos, familia y de eso se trata ¿no? Llevarnos, reunirse, socializar, fiesta, reuniones."*

exist because of the rapidly changing trends that may have happened between studies, geographic location and cultural background of the sample, or subdivisions within generations. For all these reasons I cannot say that there is a strong pattern of behaviors and experiences in both of the generations represented in this research.

5.2.7. Conformism

Conformism embodies the society and the bases of its common values that have become the society's code of conduct or social norm. Thus, socio-cultural practices within the community are one of several stimuli that a person faces as a constant pressure in order to generate a harmonious effect in the community and its members.

All human activity is subject to habituation. Therefore, conformity is the product of social learning. Every single action that is frequently repeated produces a pattern, and this pattern can be followed as a conveyed guideline. Thus, we can say that we do not intrinsically control our destiny but it is also to be controlled by the external situations that we face as a person or a group.

As defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a conformist is "A person who behaves in accordance with prevailing standards or customs and typically dislikes or avoids unconventional behavior." Kelman (1958) divided conformism into 3 types: 1) compliance, which refers to a person that agrees with the influence they are exposed to in order to gain approval from others, 2) internalization which refers to a person that accepts the influenced behavior because they find it fulfilling, and 3) identification, which refers to a person that accepts the influence because they want to create or keep an ongoing relationship with a group.

A conformist person is attached to standards or norms that describe how one should behave according to what most people do and/or what is approved or disapproved by most people. Therefore, conformism is a type of social influence that involves changes in a person's behavior and/or beliefs in order to fit with the expectations of society. These changes may or may not respond to social pressure but definitely occur because of the desire to do what is agreed to be the norm. The conformist behavior may also become a cultural practice and relate to the reasons why a university student drops out from their studies.

It is also important to point out that there is also nonconformity. It refers to the person that does not succumb to social pressure. These persons are the ones that do not care about being seen as equal to others. Such people tend to analyze the influences and decide that they do not agree with them, independently of what others think. They value the sense of singularity and tend to create distinctions to others. Nonconformists can also lose their status and any influence they have among others in the same community (Ridgeway, 1981; Forsyth, 2018).

The expression "conformarse" which in English means to conform was repeatedly referred to during the interviews. The term has a different connotation in the context of Panama, where it means to be okay with having little or with whatever has been given or accomplished, to feel content, perhaps not satisfied, with one's degree of the achievement. Thus, conformism in this context was also referred to as a factor that influences students to drop out, as an interviewee explained: ["In this sense, the issue of being happy with yourself makes you lose your desire and enthusiasm to study, because you already earn a normal base salary, you settle for what you have."] (CM07, male lawyer from Corregimiento de Rufina Alfaro, personal communication, June 4, 2016).[108]

Another interviewee, a female entrepreneur, makes reference to this concept of conformism as possibly part of the culture that surrounds most Panamanians, when she says: "Because the Panamanian is happy and calm as he is. Despite one thing or another bothering him, the Panamanian is sure of his bread (food), is conformist, has his home, why fight…] (NARR-02, single female entrepreneur, personal communication, April 23, 2016).[109]

The concept of conforming to a situation, in the Panamanian context here, is associated with being triggered by negative circumstances such as unavoidable obstacles in life situations or even low self-esteem. In this sense, dropping out from university may be connected to conformity issues with society and, in the Panamanian context of conformism, with accepting

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[108]   Original in Spanish: "*En este sentido el tema de estar conforme con uno mismo te hace como perder las ganas y el entusiasmo de estudiar, porque digo ya ganas un salario base normal, te conformas con lo que tienes.*"

[109]   Original in Spanish: "*Porque el Panameño es feliz y tranquilo como está. A pesar de que le molesten una que otra cosa, el Panameño está seguro de su pan, es conformista, tiene su casa, "pa que" luchar…*"

that dropping out was the only possibility at a particular moment of their lives.

The concept of conformism was referred to by the interviewees as accepting situations without any opposition to them. The respondents repeatedly referred to students in the education system in general as:

- Followers without a personal goal and sometimes only fulfilling their parents' desires,
- Not willing to sacrifice personal matters in order to succeed,
- Appreciating the idea of working for the money and not for success as common behaviors within society.
- Having a low level of cultural capital according to the place they live,
- Having an interest in achievement only if there is a reward.

All these attitudes are not only identified with conformism but also opportunism, poverty mindset and lack of aspirations. The ideas of not being willing to make sacrifices and working for the money and interest of achievement for a reward can also be compared to the proposition made by Tinto (1975) on the Theory of Social Exchange in reference to dropout causes after a cost-benefit analysis to determine risks and benefits.

All in all, conformism denotes a social role that people assume as a reaction to cultural and structural pressures and not a behavior of a reference group. This kind of behavior is not part of a person's personality. It is a reflex of group beliefs that carve into all the members of a target society. Thus, conformism is not only a dropping out factor but also a socio-cultural practice that has been passed through generations together with a conformist attitude of acceptance. This is because conformists cannot see any other option and it helps them to find a sense of identity and integrate better within their community.

In the case of those fulfilling their parents' desires, there is a particular case that participants mentioned about students obtaining a diploma for their parents. This is a very common occurrence and saying in Panamanian society, merely in those neighborhoods or families where the parent comes from a low class, was poor or never finished school. The parent will say, "The only thing that I want is that you give me my diploma." Although none of the former dropouts and community members referred directly to the idea of fulfilling their parents' desires and unaccomplished goals with this saying, during the focus group discussion it was also elicited. A former

dropout specifically said: [Dad, mom, in a few years I will give you a diploma, a degree] (DO03, married female merchant, personal communication, June 21, 2016).[110] The action of a student fulfilling their parent's unfinished studies corresponds to what Savig & Schwartz (2000) claim about life priorities as they change with regards to what is significant to them.

In contrast, one of the narrative interviewees believes that the objective every university student has is to get a better job. And, this belief about the university student's objective reflects back onto family thoughts about studying. The interviewee explains: [Every parent wants his children to study and be the best in life, but it is not always like that. Going to university is not the only way to succeed] (NARR03, single male singer, personal communication, April 23, 2017).[111]

To my understanding, parents inculcating and even imposing ideas of personal improvement are expected to occur in any family in which parents are concerned about their children's future. Although I didn't experience this situation as a child or adolescent, it was certainly mentioned by former dropouts when asked about their family comments on their dropping out. Therefore, I see it as an inculcated belief like neuro-linguistic programming.[112] Indeed, this idea is strongly linked to the situation of the family and also parents' previous experiences. Therefore, sons or daughters will try to conform to what their parents feel, wish or express.

Prof. Mendez, sociologist form the University of Panama, also commented on Panamanian students not having their own objectives clear, but instead following what their parents want as a way of fulfilling what their parents could not accomplish in their lives. As a gift, a sense of satisfaction for their parents, this particular behavior is seen as culturally normal in Panamanian homes. These students agree and struggle in order to cope with the cultural goal of achieving material success, motivated by their parents' ambitions. However, Prof. Mendez claims that their parents' focus is wrong: [...there

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[110] Original in Spanish: "*Papá, mamá dentro de unos años les entrego un diploma, un título".*

[111] Original in Spanish: "*Todos los padres quieren que sus hijos estudien y sean los mejores en la vida, pero no siempre es así. Ir a la universidad no es la única forma de tener éxito.*"

[112] NLP is a set of rules and techniques proposed for modifying behavior in achieving self-improvement, self-management, and more effective interpersonal communications. Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) was first developed in the 1970 by Richard Bandler and John Grinder. They pulled ideas from previous psychotherapy theories of language and personal development and created their own therapeutic form of improving human behavior.

are few homes, Panamanian homes that say: "I want you to study so that you can learn, so that you know," they tell you, I want you to have a degree...] (Prof. Mendez, personal communication, April 12, 2017).[113]

During the dropout interviews, and in agreement with what Tinto (1982) says about people's perception of dropouts, there were also non-conformists, who after dropping out saw it as an opportunity to transform what was viewed as a negative outcome into a positive situation. The presented cases of conformism in Panamanian society are not found in all communities or groups. Yet, they may be considered part of the Panamanian culture.

With reference to current norms, one narrative interviewee also made remarks on cultural practices regarding higher education and continuing studies. She compares Panamanians to incoming migrants as conformists (in the Panamanian connotation) and also points out the lack of taught aspirations:

> [...the Panamanian is sure of his bread, he is conformist, he has his house, why should I fight, if this Venezuelan is not going to stay. They are just stopping by, they come now and will go when things improve in their country; but I am always here, I am calm, this is my house, the Panamanian is how it is ...you are taught that you have to work for others, from school they put that in your head] (NARR02, single female entrepreneur, personal communication, April 25, 2017).[114]

Regarding aspirations, Sherwood (1989) suggests that a person who intends to pursue a goal must be sure of what they want and therefore have a plan including monetary investment and non-monetary investment (i.e. time, effort, third parties involvement) in order to achieve it. Thus, a university student that has set a goal towards graduating should have this plan including an evaluation of risks and investments during the program length in order to succeed. But this is something that is not often considered

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[113] Original in Spanish: "*...son pocos los hogares, hogares panameños que dicen: yo quiero que estudies para que aprendas, para que tú sepas, te dicen, yo quiero que tú tengas un título...*".

[114] Original in Spanish: "*...el Panameño está seguro de su pan, es conformista, tiene su casa, para que luchar, si total este Venezolano ni se va a quedar. Ellos vienen aquí de paso, vienen y se van cuando las cosas mejoran en su país, pero yo estoy aquí siempre, yo estoy tranquilo, este es mi casa, el panameño es como es. A ti te enseñan que tú tienes que trabajar para otro, desde la escuela te meten eso en la cabeza.*"

by university freshmen since they mostly just got out of high school and struggle to get effective orientation on what is yet to come.

Although that within the sample of interviewees gathered for this study there was not one indigenous but only one third-generation indigenous female, this cultural influence is still worth mentioning. Regarding members of indigenous reservations, there are also cultural practices that affect those who want to study. For example, in some of the Panamanian indigenous reservations, it is common for indigenous to acknowledge that men are supposed to go to work, hunt or farm and women should stay at home doing house chores. The cultural pressure and conformity with their community silently oblige women and men to stick to their established community practices as expressed by a community member:

> [There are other cases, there are indigenous groups that do not accept the fact that their daughters are going to study, it makes no sense for them. Then, because of the cultural pressure and independent of whether it suits them or not, they drop out, they simply leave] (CM08, female professor, personal communication, June 8, 2016).[115]

There are indigenous in the Panamanian territory whose cultural practices have not been substantially modified with time and traditional cultural norms still have a strong effect on their decisions.

Hence, conformism in the common context and also the Panamanian context has become another determinant in at the moment of taking the decision of dropping out from university. It strongly believe that it has even escalated from a factor to a practice.

5.3.   What the experts say

Interviewed university authorities agreed that the community or area where the student lives has an influence on them dropping out, stating that all the social, cultural and economic influence in the environment in which the student finds themselves influences what they want to do or what they want to be as they choose a university program (Carvajal & Cervantes,

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[115] Original in Spanish: *"Existen otros casos, hay grupos indígenas que para nada aceptan el hecho de que sus hijas vayan a estudiar, no le hayan sentido a eso. Entonces por la presión cultural e independientemente que les convenga o no, pues se salen, simplemente se salen."*

2018). Also, the level of parental education was associated with the decision and level of education one pursues. But the environment is not just about parents, family or peers.

The dropout phenomenon is seen by the interviewed group of experts[116] as a very common situation among university students. Prof. Mendez (personal communication, April 12, 2017), professor and sociologist at the University of Panama, states that the issue lies in the student bringing all the weaknesses they have carried throughout their life. Prof. Mendez synthesizes the issue into two elements:

First, there is a tremendous weakness in the student who comes to the university. Factors that generate this weakness are formed in the process of socialization, from cultural characteristics, academic, discipline and values. All of which its main scenario is the family and secondly the school. Second, the institution is not prepared to give the student any kind of support. Universities have a lot of outdated practices such as evaluation processes focused on tradition and not on students' expected outcomes or the use of outdated technology or no technology at all. These kinds of practices do not invite the student to stay in the university space. Lastly, Prof. Mendez claims that the country loses in economic terms as well as quality human resources when the university system does not have a concrete policy to avoid desertion.

This personal and societal context can be exacerbated by an environment of unsupportive teachers that do not contribute to the needed enthusiasm for starting a new cycle in life. On the other hand, private universities have an advantage in this regard by engaging students with sports or musical activities to keep the student entertained and to create a more integral academic environment.

Besides, there is a lack of cultural capital starting from how children are raised with or without reading habits, which results in the same practices at school. This is consistent with Bordieu (1998) and Terenzini, et al. (1996). Later at university, the students' will is diminished, demonstrated by their indifference towards methodologies, didactic techniques and lack of self-discipline. In this respect, there is also the issue of those who fail in

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[116] University authorities and staff. **Dr. Manuel Calderon** - researcher at Instituto de Estudios Nacionales (IDEN, University of Panama). **Prof. Euclides Antonio Mendez** – sociologist, researcher at the Research Center of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Panama. **Dr. Mirna Vallejos de Crespo** – Vice minister of Education at the Ministry of Education of Panama, Rector at Universidad Latina de Panama. **Mgtr. Adriana Maritza Angarita** – Rector at Universidad del Istmo Panama, President at the Association of Private Universities of panama. **Administrative staff** - Universidad de Santander, Panama.

fundamental subjects which are requisites for upcoming subjects in the later semesters. This situation contributes to students being expelled from theirs programs while it also undermines the education system. As Prof. Mendez explains,

> ["Before, the person came to the university with much desire, with an impetus...now (they) do not cope with the pressure of academics and the result is that teachers will begin to lower their standards, their levels for retention purposes and therefore, in order to keep their job"] (Prof. Mendez, personal communication, April 12, 2017).[117]

On the other hand, some of these students might not prioritize university studies. Their priorities may be those related to their immediate families such as providing food and other necessities, which would support Blumer's (1986) arguments. Additionally, there are some cases in which extreme poverty takes action in pushing students out of university due to costs including not only registration fees but also meals, transportation and materials.

An interesting observation on dropping out itself is that it is not in the minds of Panamanian students. Sometimes, dropping out is not a one-time action but a fluid one, in the sense of hopping in and out of the university system and/or changing to other institutions or programs with the aim of finishing the program one day. Although when finishing high school students feel excited about following higher education, most of them expect that after graduation from university they will be entitled to an immediate salary to compensate their expenses in the form of a well-paid job.

Connected to this phenomenon, I was able to identify factors such as students having unclear objectives in life, cultural issues surrounding their family and community, relations within the community where students live regarding financial and environmental issues, motivational issues and also institutional factors. In this sense, Dr. Calderon (personal communication, April 12, 2017), sociologist and researcher at the University of Panama, claims that each and every factor interacts in the life of the student in a continuous process. For Dr. Calderon, financial capital is related to cultural

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[117] Original in Spanish: *"Antes, la persona venía a la Universidad con muchas ganas, con un ímpetu… ahora no soporta la presión de lo académico y el resultado es que los docentes empezarán a bajar sus estándares, sus niveles para poder retener una matrícula y por lo tanto, pues poder conservar el empleo."*

capital. Furthermore, the student's academic performance is connected to the degree of positive or negative communication with their teachers.

From another point of view, students can make their decisions based on perceptions and recommendations of others, but not on the fundamental knowledge of what the program is about and what it takes to get to graduation day. This is also connected to the importance given to the completion of the program or school year rather than focusing on what is learned on the way to graduation.

Contrary to school tracking[118], in Panama a public school student has to choose between sciences, accounting or arts on their way to entering high school. Therefore, their high school training will only be focused on one of those main branches. Of course, this system has its advantages, but it also has disadvantages when the student graduates and goes to university. At university, some programs have the pre-requisite of having previous studies according to the selected major. Most students from private schools do not have this problem since their academic plans integrate the three branches. Thus, both the requirement to choose and this choice being enforced at such an early age without the proper orientation can present problems later.

Another hurdles for preventing dropout is that most students approach university with the sole intention of getting a degree that will position them in a well-paid job. In contrast, there are also those students who will work first in order to generate the resources to pay for tuition at a private university, as it is considered of higher educational quality. Contrastingly, paying for tuition is often seen as debt and not as an investment, reflecting the least effort attitude. Moreover, in public universities, academic plans change every five to eight years, which forces the student to retake the same subjects again if the student was not consistent in finishing the program in consecutive years. This situation also demotivates the student to continue.

There are also contrasting perceptions on educational institutions. For example, attending public education institutions (school) is seen as the path of least resistance because of a lower educational demands. In contrast, attending public universities is considered to excel among all other universities; but sometimes it is the last option because of its longer curricula than private universities. Once again, the purpose of getting a

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[118] School tracking is sorting out students by intellectual ability into groups for subjects or classes and study program within a school.

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degree is to get a diploma in order to be better paid. Thus, the Panamanian study culture is focused on employability rather than learning or personal enrichment.

Another comparison was also made between public and private university in terms of dropping out and returning. According to Mgtr.[119] Angarita (personal communication, April 19, 2017), Rector at Universidad del Istmo Panama and President of the Association of Private Universities of Panama, there are also cases in which students return to their private universities to finish their programs after dropping out, as they do not want to give up all their effort and money invested.

Dr. Vallejos de Crespo (personal communication, April 29, 2017), Vice-Minister of Education and University Rector, believes that the Panamanian culture involves a lot of criticism without offering any solution. She feels that university students in general are only interested in the title and not on how they can contribute to the country or to their own lives. Instead, they act blindly towards the fictitious distinction found in an academic title.

Prof. Mendez (personal communication, April 12, 2017), as a sociologist working at the University of Panama, also agreed that young people at school age lack an understanding of the relationship between school, job survival and being a good citizen. He explains that this is a link that has been lost for years now. Young people do not know what school is for, aside from to study, take tests and get a diploma. This young individual that goes to school watches television, observes others selling drugs and making money illegally and finally realizes that they can survive doing this, the same as if they were studying for a degree. Another factor could also be that a person who is self-employed may have the same average salary as a person who is a regular employee at any company. Or, as a taxi driver, you may have the opportunity of earning as much as a professional that studied at university.

With these examples, Prof. Mendez tries to explain that young individuals observe different ways to take advantage of their opportunities and make choices downplaying how education can contribute to their life and personal development. Young people do not understand what school is for, because they expect rewards from society and not how can they contribute, the same way they do not see education as an investment in their lives. These young individuals do not have the notion of being a good citizen,

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[119]   Mgtr. = Magister Artium

nationalism or even competition; they do not understand it because nobody has taken the time to explain it to them.

On graduation rates and gender inequality, Prof. Mendez (personal communication, April 12, 2017) pointed out that although there are no statistics on the number of dropouts, there is a large difference in the quantity of women graduating from university compared to men (table 15).

Year	Students registered	Graduated	Women	Men
2004	128,863	18,655	13,060	5,595
2005	128,075	17,800	12,178	5,622
2006	130,838	19,679	13,161	6,518
2007	132,660	20,182	13,438	6,744
2008	134,054	21,061	13,907	7,154
2009	135,181	21,706	14,293	7,413
2010	136,879	21,821	14,043	7,778
2011	133,497	22,172	14,103	8,069
2012	140,303	22,786	14,227	8,559
2013	124,375	21,513	15,371	8,381
2014	142,725	26,988	17,644	9,077
2015	156,635	26,031	17,285	8,746
2016	161,102	29,365	19,100	10,265
2017	168,335	29,473	-	-

Table 14. Statistics on the number of female and male university graduates per year.

Prof. Mendez comments that this has to do with socialization itself. Women in Panama City are raised under a greater regime of constant discipline in achieving their goals. Contrastingly, men are more involved with labor issues (Ribeiro, 2000). So, if a man has to choose between studying and working, he will choose to work and provide. To illustrate this, La Estrella de Panama[120] published the statistic that women in Panama represent 40.3% of the labor force and the fact that women perform 15% more managerial positions than men. (Figure 11). Also, 1 out of 3 working

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[120] Panamanian newspaper founded in 1849.

women performs a managerial position versus 1 out of 6 men.

Figure 12. Labor statistics on Panamanian women.
Source: La Estrella de Panama, 8/3/16.

Patriarchal philosophical ideologies are more than a century old and time has changed towards development in all instances (Miller, 2017). However, the man is still head of the family and is supposed to work to sustain himself and women are still in charge of taking care of the husband, kids, the elderly and the sick (De La Torre, 2009), but this is not always the case. Life situations and time have contributed to a different view on stereotypes and have opened opportunities for equal participation of men and women in professional fields and even entrepreneurship. Still, the incidence of high performance university graduate women present in Panama is a matter of novelty.

The pre-established patriarchal social system adopted after colonizers in the XVI century and influence of capitalism from the US during the construction of the Panama Canal have created obstacles for women to develop themselves in the professional and social environment. Nowadays, upper tier professional positions in Panama are filled by women. The question then arises - what has been going on these years?

Analyzing Mr. Joseph's comments on young men dropping out from university the advantage consumer trends take on young and immature university, students and the consequences of their choices as follow:

[His primary goals – what were they? - to go to the club, go to the movies, buy jeans, buy some shoes, to enjoy those pleasures that consumer marketing imposed on him. In an immature, young brain; those were the sensations. Later we realize that those sensations, the ones that deserted (dropped out) least were women. Why did women hold out longer than men? We were realizing that in a very macho society, highly consumerist as we were, without having to admit it, the boy had to go out to the street (get money, get a job) to invite the girlfriend to the movies. He had to get money, if the girlfriend wanted something, he had to get money and pay so we have gentleman's touch] (personal communication, April 17, 2017).[121]

Mr. Joseph describes what he has experienced and what he still observes on the university campus. But, more importantly, he clarifies one of the practices that university male students perform that can contribute to dropping out from their studies. This clarification even gives an explanation to why the number of university graduated women surpasses that of men. Following on this, Mr. Joseph dives into the role of women in the university as young adult students targeted by consumerism:

[...a university girl intends to spend time or date either with professionals or with university students who have similar projections in the common and the logical. The university boy who wants this girl has to have the ability to reach her, to be able to court her. In the search to court her more, he had to have the ability to pay for her, something very typical of youth and consumerism that has entered the country. After eighty-nine (1989)[122], the topic of consumerism opens violently. That generation suffered the most dizzying attack of consumerism. The young people went after easy jobs for merchants, construction, and they were leaving their studies. Many went for the night shifts knowing that they had to continue studying, but they also had to go to work in the day and that was given. Women, on the other hand, if they had completed studying, it was intended to capture boys'

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[121] Original in Spanish: *"Sus objetivos primarios ¿cuáles eran? ir a la discoteca, ir al cine, comprarse un jeans, comprarse unas zapatillas, para disfrutar de esos placeres que el mercadeo consumista le imponía. Un cerebro inmaduro, joven, exclusivo; esas eran las sensaciones. Luego nos damos cuenta que esas sensaciones, las que menos desertaban eran las mujeres. ¿Por qué las mujeres sostenían más tiempo que los hombres? Nos fuimos dando cuenta que en una sociedad muy machista, altamente consumista como hemos sido nosotros, sin tener que admitirlo, el chico tenía que salir a la calle para poder invitar a la novia al cine. Tenía que conseguir dinero, si la novia quería algo había que sacar dinero, entonces tenemos un toque de caballeros."*

[122] 1989 is referred to as the year USA invaded Panama.

attention as bait. In other words, for women, everything was free, the boys have to pay, they even paid double] (personal communication, April 17, 2017).[123]

Once again, patriarchal philosophical ideologies in which Panamanians have been raised assert their influence. Men have to work for themselves, for their girlfriend or their family. It is not a matter of appearances but in Panamanian society the way it has to be. Even those women that work and earn well expect their men to take charge of all the house's expenses. With this, I realize that there is a certain level of discrimination to men and not so to women. Women are no longer expected to solely take care of the husband, children and household but also encouraged to become economically active and help support them. Gender inequality can affect both men and women equally and change their lives. While men can have privileged jobs, political and social positions, in many cases, it also takes a toll on their personal aspirations.

5.3.1. Institutional involvement

The expert interviewees voiced several concerns related to institutional involvement and acknowledged that there have not been many approaches from public universities towards combating the dropout phenomenon. Public universities do, however, have a different focus on students by helping them to choose the program that best fits them according to their previous skills and personality. Before the academic year, there are several propaedeutic courses prior to the first semester. These courses are given to students in order to attenuate any lack of general knowledge. This approach is also performed by some private universities although in those institutions it is not free. According to Dr. Calderon (personal communication, April 12, 2017), there are some faculties that provide a tutor who help students when they have difficulties in some subjects that are pre-requisites for other subjects so they do not fall behind.

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[123] *"…una chica universitaria pretende salir o con profesionales o con estudiantes universitarios que tenga proyecciones similares en lo común y en lo lógico. El chico universitario que pretende a esta chica tiene que tener la capacidad de alcanzarle, poderla pretender. En la búsqueda de pretenderla más a ella, tenía que tener la capacidad de invitarla, cosa muy propia de la juventud y el consumismo que ha ingresado al país. Luego del ochenta y nueve (1989), se abre el tema del consumismo violentamente. Esa generación sufría el más vertiginoso ataque del consumismo. Los jóvenes se iban poco a poco a trabajos fáciles de mercaderista, construcción, e iban abandonando los estudios. Muchos iban para la noche sabiendo que tenían que seguir estudiando, pero tenían que ir a trabajar en el día y eso se fue dando. Las mujeres en cambio, sí se hiciera un estudio, se pretendía capturar su atención como carnada. O sea, para las mujeres, todo era gratis, los chicos tienen que pagar, hasta pagaban el doble."*

On the other hand, private universities have their own internal studies on student dropouts. They follow up on their students in order to address dropout causes and understand them better. According to Mgtr. Angarita (personal communication, April 19, 2017), private universities, like the one over which she presides, even have a department dedicated to tracking their student's advancements and any potential dropouts. Dr. Vallejos de Crespo (personal communication, April 29, 2017) explains that at the private university she chairs, there is a multi-cohort study with the aim of comparing the number of students that enter vs. the ones who graduate and follow up on the different cases.

In this sense, Mgtr. Angarita (personal communication, April 19, 2017) states that the most important aspect to face concerning university dropout is building some awareness among Panamanian university students regarding their own effort. The second aspect has to do with the vocational part and the third aspect has to do with future employability. Mgtr. Angarita also infers that there should be a prominent desire to help people get trained if not graduated, in order to acquire some knowledge that will help them build a career without necessarily a university degree. This argument is also supported by past studies (Astin, 1993; Claes, Van Hove, Vandevelde, Van Loon, and Schalock, 2012). The idea is to be supportive in a broader way. For these reasons, there are now well developed plans on virtual education platforms with the aim of helping students with mobility issues and giving a boost to those who are about to drop out to at least complete the term.

But, as Dr. Vallejos de Crespo (personal communication, April 29, 2017) claims, there are also counterproductive approaches to counteract the dropout phenomenon. There are also cases of private universities in which academic plans are accredited by CONEAUPA[124] [National Evaluation and accreditation Council of Panama] that market short term programs giving flexible attendance opportunities but with lack any significant academic rigor. Dr. Vallejos de Crespo refers to this scheme and paraphrases the way it intends to convince the prospective student: ["I am telling you, this is easy, enter here and you will not fail, that is, I am giving you a subliminal message"] (Dr. Vallejos de Crespo, personal communication, April 29, 2017).[125]

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[124] Consejo Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria de Panamá

[125]   Original in Spanish: *"Yo le estoy diciendo a usted, esto es fácil, entra aquí no vas a fracasar, o sea se lo estoy dando un mensaje subliminal."*

Staff of Universidad de Santander (personal communication, April 21, 2017) insisted in the importance of the orientation process, not only for students to choose their program, but also to identify their skills and if their abilities fit within that program to reduce the chances of dropout (Matosas & Silveira, 2003). The implementation of reading and writing programs and independent tutoring for mandatory subjects including mathematics, physics and chemistry were also mentioned to boost prior knowledge.

5.3.2. Government involvement

Within the Panamanian government there are several institutions involved with alternative approaches towards facilitating academic education, such as SENACYT[126], Ciudad del Saber[127], IFARHU[128], and INADEH[129].

One expert interviewee, Mr. Joseph[130] (personal communication, April 17, 2017), comments that several years ago there was a government-sponsored giveaway of backpacks, school supplies and even laptops to high school students which made no difference in their interest in further study.

> [... the student did not make it their own (high school diploma) and there was no sense of ownership. There is not that attraction to study, develop or start a business. There is instead a deep message that is: study to work and not to start a business, study to work. We are creating that feeling that I'm just going to prepare to work][131] (Personal communication, April 17, 2017)

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[126] Secretaria Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología.

[127] Some 120 hectares and more than 200 buildings of what was once the Clayton military base are now home to an international community NGOs and other agencies established for the purpose of business, academic, scientific, and humanistic collaboration. The objective is human and sustainable development based on knowledge.

[128] Instituto para la Formación y Aprovechamiento del Recurso Humano

[129] Instituto Nacional de Formación Profesional y Capacitación para el Desarrollo Humano.

[130] Licdo. Omar Joseph Jr. - former student from the University of Panama. At that time, he was involved in one of the most prominent student associations, giving support and advice to new and former students. Currently, he works as a Public relationist at the University of Panama newspaper.

[131] Original in Spanish: *"…el estudiante no lo hizo suyo (el diploma de secundaria) y no hubo sentido de pertenencia. No hay esa atracción por estudiar, desarrollarse o emprender. Hay en cambio hay un mensaje profundo de que es: estudia para trabajar y no para emprender, estudia para trabajar. Estamos creando esa sensación de que solo me voy a preparar para trabajar."*

Nowadays, there are scholarships and monetary aids to all public school students. However, these do not guarantee that students continue their studies, because they do not identify themselves with their studies but with any money they can get from the government. In this sense, Mr. Joseph also explains how the minds of students are being prepared to believe that they only need to get a job and work. Students are not taught that they can become entrepreneurs and innovators.

Contrastingly, subsidies such as scholarships or computers given by the government to the student population nationwide have been strongly criticized. Public opinion is that these subsides are prejudicial to students by substituting an interest in studying for the interest for money. As commented by staff of a private university, ["Hopefully the government will discover the importance of encouraging the spirit of education in early childhood...and not so much subsidy"] (EXP03, personal communication April 21, 2017)[132]. With this observation, it is implied that subsides are viewed as temporary relief but not as solutions.

The government-sponsored involvement with the PISA[133] survey in 2009 is another example of unsuccessful policy. The decision to take part in PISA led to negative impacts in the country. Dr. Vallejos de Crespo (personal communication, April 29, 2017) claims that when the results of PISA were published for the very first time, the handling of it was so bad that the incoming education minister decided not to enter PISA again. Dr. Vallejos de Crespo criticizes the way the test and its management was performed. She believes that if the test management had been done individually for educational centers, everything would have been different since there were several high schools with a very high performance in comparison to others. Perhaps the handling that was also given to the information by the media was not the best. The results of the first trial tests should have created a concern about the performance of Panamanian high school students as they

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[132] Original in Spanish: "*ojala el gobierno encontrará la importancia que tiene el fomentar el espíritu de educación desde pequeño en los niños... y no tanto subsidio.*"

[133] The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/ Panama has participated in PISA 2009 and PISA-D 2018. The last participation was promoted by the new OECD initiative to learn about the life skills that lagged students and adolescents have outside the education system. Due to this special feature, the exercise was applied both in educational centers and in homes. http://www.meduca.gob.pa/prensa/Culminan_jornadas_piloto_de%20_PISA_2018_PISA%20el%20Desarrollo%E2%80%99

had very low averages,[134] and not an opportunity for mockery[135] on the first attempt of the Ministry of Education in the interest of improving education in general.

5.4.   Conclusion

The examination of the factors that have an effect on university dropout showed that every person has a separate case which includes not just one reason for dropping out but many.

Although the race factor is not determinant in this study, it does play a role given discrimination based on race in relation to social status. However, I did not emphasize it as a determinant factor to university dropouts as it is difficult to define in any one person. Panamanians are considered to be majority mixed-race (Arias, 2002; Bell, 1910); as explained in chapter 2.

In this research, it is difficult to determine whether other educational and vocational objectives among former dropouts were the cause of leaving university. Nonetheless, I can conclude that most of the former dropouts in this study considered university education an important aspiration in life as well as for advancing their career or jobs. However, they were not always limited by the lack of a diploma to create a satisfactory future once they dropped out. Their mentality and priorities changed.

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134 PISA 2009 results. Panama ranked 62/65. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932343342

135   Stated the average obtained at the PISA tests in 2009, the Minister of Education, Lucy Molinar, and her work was strongly criticized and mocked.

6. **CHAPTER   To be or not to be depends on where I live**

The concept of community is widely used in the social sciences. This concept has a great collection of meanings and foci in academia as well as in everyday speech (Ander-Egg, 2011). The word community derives from the Latin *communitas*, from the Latin *communis*, which means "shared in common." Exploring the different meanings this concept has in the social sciences, its scopes can be detailed by reviewing its different uses.

For the purpose of this study, community will be simply defined as the setting (geographic location or neighborhood), where a group of people with diverse characteristics live. Note that in this definition, location is what determines the community; and the beliefs and interests are not explicitly mentioned but implied in the diverse characteristics of the group of people that belong to the same community.

The meaning of the term community demands more reflection, debate and negotiation than we usually expect in order to understand it well, as it is in general related to a group of people that share common ideas or beliefs (Cohen, 1985; Hogget, 1997; Smith, 2001). Zarate (2007) gives some characteristics to the word community such as:

- not being only a set of individuals but a cultural system,
- having a life of its own that differentiates it from other communities,
- learning by observation occurs within it and learning is generated from everyday life,
- relationships, attitudes and behaviors of the people are at stake,
- it is a scenario where interests, resources and needs converge and promote its movement.

To this meaning, Socarras (2004) adds the importance of the sense of belonging that a community possesses apart from the geographical concept. She explains that a geographically delimited community also shares cultural aspects such as history, interests, a spiritual and physical reality, habits and norms that allow mobilization, cohesion, and cooperation among members of the community. And, it is precisely here where I start my argument on the influence that cultural aspects, shared and performed by the members of a community, can have on students' decision making.

MacQueen et al. (2001) explain that a community also involves the locus. This refers to a spatial location that can be a region, a province, or where

people share the same surroundings or environment which gives a sense of a place. In the case of this study, the locus will be districts and their divisions; specifically communities when referring to neighborhoods.

6.1.   Socio-cultural practices in the community

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1972) defines practices as "The product of a dialectical relationship between a situation and a habitus, understood as a system of durable and transposable dispositions which, integrating all past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions, and make it possible to accomplish infinitely differentiated tasks, thanks to the analogical transfer of schemata acquired in prior practice." (p. 261). Therefore, practices are actions that are more than traditions, rules preserved by the community memory. Aspects present in the individual's community such as language, ideals, values and identity, or violence and crime can be examples of practices that may have an important effect on students' decisions.

Bourdieu developed the concept of "Habitus." The concept comprises a set of deep-rooted habits, skills, and temper we acquire through our life experiences. Bourdieu's own definition of "Habitus" is "A structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices" (1998, p. 170). Nash (1990) describes this concept as a "system of embodied dispositions which generate practice in accordance with the structural principles of the social world" (pp. 432-433).

Navarro (2006) also comments on Habitus and adds, "It is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period" (p. 16). Navarro explains that Habitus gives form to our views, feelings and actions (practices); and, at the same time, reproduces the social structure where we participate. According to Frese (2015), norms are changing variables in the development of practices, as well as continuous practices that might change the norms in time. These norms depict how people behave based on their way of thinking and how this process subsequently manipulates how others behave. This means that when this behavior becomes a routine, it turns into a practice.

Frese (2015) connects these practices to culture and claims that, "Cultural practices are shared perceptions of how people routinely behave in a culture" (p. 1327). He also claims that however norms and practices are connected in a continuous cycle, values as "shared ideals of a culture"

should also be integrated when trying to define cultural practices. Values have a positive or negative connotation as they regulate behaviors, whereas norms are created after observation and repetition upon agreement. Here conformity within cultural practices is an individual decision.

Socio-cultural practices occurs in a cycle basis in which people from a community behave in a particular way. This behavior turns into a habit making it a practice. This practice evolves into a norm after other people in the same community conform to it. Later, norms become the culture of the community. It becomes a cycle when new integrant of the community start practicing the same behavior since it is the culture of the place. To illustrate this idea I provide the following diagram.
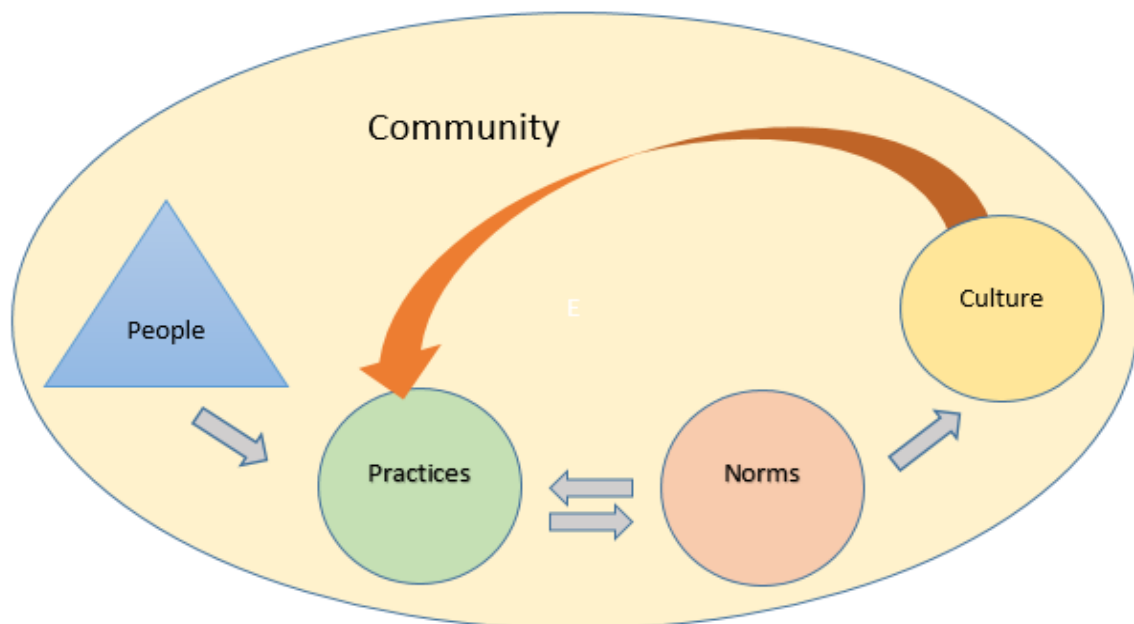
Figure 13. Socio-cultural practices cycle. Source: author

Socio-cultural practices are a socially constructed phenomena that function as a mechanism in society that facilitate socialization with others. This socialization is promoted by the use of practices and values attained to a group, making all those who belong to this group influenced towards it and almost incapable of changing. In this sense, conformism is tightly attached to norms and practices.

6.2.   Community practices associated with university dropout

During the former dropout and community members' interviews, I was able to identify several practices as distinctive features in families and communities and gathered a list of different categories of community practices, out of the former dropout participants and community members' observation and opinions (table 16).

Community practices experienced by former dropouts	Community practices observed by community members
Peer pressure	Limited education
Lack of family values	Gender related
Crime/drug influence	Crime/drug influence
Party culture	Stereotyping
Entry level jobs (without studies)	Home sustainability
Isolation	
Psychological bullying/envy/jealousy	
Family deprivation	

Table 15. Socio-cultural practices connected to university dropouts as observed by former dropouts and community members.

Some of these practices or learned attitudes mentioned in the list may have affected the respondents' socialization at a personal level, others at a family level and others at a community level in either a positive or negative way. This directionality depends on the person's aspirations and models of life desired (Frese, 2015).

Within the description of their experiences, the interviewees revealed that dropping out from university is the consequence of many factors and practices that make a person unable to avoid taking that decision.

6.2.1. Communities and practices

From the communities with most interviewees in the District of Panama, the description mostly involved gangs and young people without a vision of the future, where the government takes no action. Their population was described as being comprised of lots of youth, single mothers, and dysfunctional families who are generally poor. There is a lack of vision towards the future. Younger students' lack parental supervision mostly

because they are working during the day and those who are prospective university students do not see pursuing a degree as a way to climb socially but rather economically. Also, the strong influence of politicians using false promises and people resorting to criminality as a way to escape from poverty was reported. Thus, there are people in these communities that end up being deceived into believing in the false promises and there are others that admire and approve the politicians' corrupt ways.

On the other hand, newer corregimientos with newer neighborhoods may vary in their practices and thus ways of living. It should be noted that there is a great difference between the two districts in the study since the District of Panama[136] was the very first district, while the District of San Miguelito[137] is relatively new and covers newer neighborhoods. However, it may be difficult to understand this comparison if not acquainted with the location of both districts since San Miguelito is embedded in the center of Panama City (See Annex 1).

Interviewed community members and former dropouts described the **Corregimiento of Juan Diaz**[138], District of Panama as mostly composed of adults, with young adults being "the problematic ones." As for practices, the young adults tend to pursue an easy life and easy money. One and community member from Corregimiento of Juan Diaz explained that this community is formed mainly of adults who are used to meeting on weekends, partying, dancing, playing, eating, drinking and finishing the social gathering before dark. Then, everybody returns to their homes for security purposes (CM05, male professor, personal communication June 4, 2016). This fact was also corroborated by a former dropout from this same community (DO35, female customer service agent, personal communication, June 29, 2016).

Another interviewee from this community, a former dropout explained the mindset of the locals:

> [In the community in which I live there are two types of thoughts. One where the student must continue their studies until the end, even until they graduate from the university. But then is the other, when one is young and takes certain commitments. Their mentality is that one must leave university and start working to face those commitments that you

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[136] The District of Panama has 19 Corregimientos.

[137] The District of San Miguelito has 9 Corregimientos.

[138] Founded on August 14, 1913.

acquired] (DO36, married male driver, personal communication, June 29, 2016).[139]

This former dropout also explained that it is very common to see university freshmen quit their studies and get minimum wage jobs to cope with their family expenses and rather than personal ones. He continued to comment on the ones that attend university and finish. These are mostly supported by their family.

Another interviewee, a community member from **Corregimiento de Santa Ana**[140], District of Panama said:

> [Really, living in the Barrio de Santa Ana is a disadvantage, because the neighborhood absorbs them; and, I repeat the gangs take over the young and the young people get lost...they do not have means to entertain themselves in a healthy manner or anyone to give them orientation] (CM02, male teacher, personal communication, June 6, 2016).[141]

Within the description of the corregimiento de Santa Ana, former dropouts also referred to those people who are not in gangs. However, most of them are nevertheless unemployed and/or started their families at a very young age. These people are unemployed due to the lack of knowledge or vocational preparation and general orientation towards young people.

Another interesting common practice that one community member interviewee from **Corregimiento of Pedregal**[142], District of Panama addressed was gender and criminal stereotyping related to crime incidence, and personal security issues as a factor for not attending university. In this regard, one male driver community member from this community explained how he observed that men and women are assigned roles, even in criminal stereotyping. If a person is to become part of a gang, it is likely

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[139] Original in Spanish*: "En la comunidad en que yo vivo hay dos tipos de pensamientos. Uno en donde el estudiante debe seguir sus estudios hasta el final inclusive hasta llegar graduarse de la Universidad, pero está el otro, de cuando uno es joven y coge ciertos compromisos. La mentalidad es de que tienes que dejar la Universidad y empezar a trabajar para enfrentar entonces esos compromisos que adquiriste."*

[140] Founded on April 29, 1915.

[141] Original in Spanish: *"Realmente, vivir en el Barrio de Santa Ana es una desventaja, porque el barrio los absorbe, y repito las pandillas se adueñan de los jóvenes y los jóvenes se pierden...no tienen en que entretenerse sanamente o alguien que los oriente."*

[142] Founded on June 23, 1960.

a man. Being this the case, women must look after the family since this man cannot be counted in. The community member explained it as follows:

> [The fathers, the boys, they are in their gang, they are in their world and they are not going to support those children, because they do not have money. Women have to go to work, so there is no university, they do not finish their studies...the neighborhood where one lives is no longer the same as before. The neighborhood is full of drugs, illegal games...] (CM03, married male driver, personal communication, June 10, 2016).[143]

In his words, this community member not only attests to the incidence of gangs in the area but also the exclusiveness of men on gangs. Also, he comments on the issue of a woman raising a family as if she were alone with no partner at her side. This issue clearly turns into a cycle of poverty (Bernal, 2001) where kids are to follow what each of their parents do. This cycle also extends to educational opportunities, reinforcing the social inequality gap.

Also, there is a strong stigmatization on people from more insecure red zone communities.[144] Three community members, all of different communities, agreed that there is a stereotyping and stigmatization practice, a subliminally instilled thought about poor and rich people, as to who is supposed to succeed in life or not. Moreover, in focus group #1, one of the participants made reference to this stereotyping:

> [...for example there are people who say: If I come from X place where there is a lot of crime, there is a lot of poverty, there are so many social factors that people associate to marginalize other people and say: "well, if you come from Curundú[145], you cannot study, you cannot get a bachelor's degree, because you

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[143] Original in Spanish: *"Los padres, los varones, ellos andan en su pandilla, ellos andan es en su mundo y ellos no van a mantener a esos hijos, porque primero que nada ellos no tienen plata. Las mujeres tienen que salir a trabajar, así es que no hay Universidad, no terminan sus estudios…el barrio donde uno vive ya no es como antes. El barrio está plagado de drogas, de juegos ilegales…"*

[144] Red zone is commonly used in Panama to neighborhoods or places where there are high crime rates and therefore insecurity.

[145] Curundú is the smallest corregimiento of the District of Panama, where until a decade ago, the poor live crammed in small houses of wood, cardboard, zinc and other cheap materials. This corregimiento enjoys a bad reputation due to a high crime rate, poverty and unemployment. In recent years the government has invested in housing improvements and projects of socio-cultural interest.

left Curundú." But if you come from Costa del Este, from San Francisco…][146] (FG01, personal communication, April 27, 2017).[147]

This behavior supports what Galster (1995) says about the effects that the neighborhood's ideology has on its locals' success, which in this case, can be culturally manipulated by stereotyping practices.

Furthermore, community members also mentioned the cases of people that didn't study at all and how they succeed in life; raising the debate over the need of going to university versus having a job or being a successful entrepreneur. This comparison also has to do with the current reality of the labor market in Panama, where professionals are not well paid in accordance with what they do, with their qualifications, or are simply unable to get a job. To this idea, a community member of Juan Diaz, District of Panama reacted:

> [...they should offer other options so that the university is not necessarily the only option. Let other alternatives such as vocational schools be known, which many students do not know about and others do not see it as a valid way to overcome and to climb the social ladder. It's that the university studies are overrated here. Without a university diploma many young people think that they cannot achieve what they are looking for, when in reality it should not be that way] (CM05, male professor, personal communication, June 4, 2016).[148]

In the last years, there have been several government attempts to promote vocational training[149] and entrepreneurship.[150] However, there is still the

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[146] San Francisco is a corregimiento in the District of Panama. It belongs to the urban set of the city of Panama and represents the commercial, financial and tourist axis of the Panamanian capital. Costa del Este is an exclusive zone of real estate development in the city of Panama

[147] Original in Spanish: *"…por ejemplo hay personas que dicen: "bueno, este yo vengo de X lugar" ¿verdad? mucha delincuencia, hay mucha pobreza, hay tantos factores sociales que la gente como que margina a las personas y dicen: "bueno pero si tú vienes de Curundú, tú no puedes estudiar, tú no puedes ser un Licenciado, porque tú saliste de Curundú." Pero si vienes de Costa del Este, de San Francisco…"*

[148] Orignial in Spanish: *"…deberían ofrecer otras opciones para que la Universidad no sea necesariamente la única opción. Que se den a conocer otras alternativas como las escuelas vocacionales, que muchísimos estudiantes las desconocen y otros no la ven como una manera válida, esto de superar y de escalar la escala social. Es que los estudios universitarios están sobrevalorados aquí. Sin un diploma universitario muchos jóvenes piensan que no pueden lograr eso que ellos buscan, cuando en realidad no debe ser de esa forma."*

[149] ITSE, Instituto Técnico Superior Especializado, founded in 2018.

[150] AMPYME, Autoridad de la Micro, Pequeña y Mediana Empresa, founded in May, 2000.

need for one-on-one talks with prospective participants. I personally believe it is not a matter of credibility but of reaching out to prospective students.

The **District of San Miguelito** is called "the special district" because of its dense population located in the center of the Panama District. The communities or neighborhoods that are part of this district are different in all aspects. For example, in the corregimientos of Rufina Alfaro and Jose D. Espinar, the neighborhoods are mostly formed by single-family residences in private neighborhoods. Families in which there are up to three generations living under the same roof. Parents go to work and are not so familiar with what goes on around the neighborhood. Young people study at university and give their best effort. Those who own a car or can borrow one from their parents have the advantage of being able to drive to private universities, even if they are not nearby. On the other hand, those who travel by bus to private and public universities located in the city center find the disadvantage of transportation issues at peak hours and also traveling long distances.

Regarding financial matters, people in this community are middle income. Most of the time, both parents are professionals. Consequently, as a common practice, those members of the family at the age of university study want to manage their own finances, therefore some of them rather work than study as asserted by one member of this community: [...if they are in the university, some cannot work and then they want to manage their own money] (CM04, female manager, personal communication, June 6, 2016).[151] Students are also described by one male legal assistant community member as lacking a set goals and a clear vision of what they want to be or do with their lives; they lack compromise.

The **Corregimiento of Jose D. Espinar**[152] is a strategically located neighborhood adjacent to the main highway into the city center. Therefore, the distances in public and private transport are quite reasonable even with traffic jams at peak hours. It comprises a wide area and it is made up of mostly private neighborhoods. One member of this community described her community as follows:

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[151] Original in Spanish: "*…si están en la Universidad, algunos no pueden trabajar y entonces quieren manejar su propio dinero.*"

[152] Declared as corregimiento at the moment the District of San Miguelito was founded.

[Where I am located there is a fairly quiet environment, there is not much movement. People are usually workers, they are normally at home at night, so we do not have much contact between neighbors. ...in activities that go against the tranquility of the community, we always seek agreements in community consensus] (CM06, female secretary, personal communication, June 4, 2016).[153]

The practice of seeking community consensus is broadly used in private neighborhoods with the aim of promoting participation among neighbors and solving situations that affect the community as a whole. One example of this practice is the organization of "vecinos vigilantes", which is the organization of neighbors to watch over burglars and disturbing situations around their community. Another example is proposing meetings to make better use of the neighborhood's facilities such as remodeling parks and road signs.

Community members from this area commented that in the corregimiento of Jose D. Espinar there is a common belief that in order to study, a person needs to have money. One former dropout commented: [Nowadays, to be at the university, it is necessary to cover both travel expenses, copy expenses, and work expenses, all of this comes at a cost] (DO43, married female library assistant, personal communication, July 4, 2016).[154]

Although this belief is contradictory to current public universities' registration fees[155], it is also true since there are always costs tied to university studies such as books, copies, and activities included in the program such as workshops and fieldtrips. However, this not only applies to university studies but also those students that attend elementary school and high school. As a parent, there is a desire to give our children the best things we can. In this sense, parents would like to register their children in private schools[156] because these are supposed to be better than the public

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[153] Original in Spanish: *"Donde yo estoy situada hay un ambiente bastante tranquilo, no hay mucho movimiento. Las personas por lo general son trabajadoras, nada más pasan en casa en el horario nocturno o sea que no tenemos mucho contactos entre vecinos. … en actividades que van en contra de la tranquilidad de la comunidad, siempre se trata de buscar acuerdos en consenso."*

[154] Original in Spanish: *"hoy en día ya para estar en la Universidad hay que cubrir tanto gastos de pasaje, gastos de copias, como gastos de trabajo, todo eso lleva un costo."*

[155] The semester fee for the University of Panama (UP) is $27.50. The semester fee for the Technical University of Panama (UTP) varies starting at approximately $30.

[156] According to MEDUCA (Ministry of Education) until 2016 there were 10 official private schools in the Corregimiento Jose D. Espinar, and only surpassed by 12 in the Corregimiento Rufina Alfaro, San Miguelito.

ones; therefore, a parent must earn enough money not just for registering their children in private schools but also for all the costs involved with it.

As a consequence of this support throughout elementary and high school, students from this community were described as having a lack of commitment towards studies since they have been carried through the education system as followers. They attend school and grasp what they can but were not taught to pursue dreams. They attend classes for the sake of just going to primary/secondary school or getting a diploma because that is what a person of their age should do. But, when they are ready for university, they need to take care of their own future. However, at this point they lack maturity, objectives and goals. One community member explains this:

> ["The student who does not have formality with their goals, that person who suddenly does not have a fixed link with what they really want to be in life...many times there are people who reach 27 and 30 years old and still do not know what they want to do. In fact I have seen cases of people who have that age range and when you go to see their resume', they have worked in ten places in different positions and it is not something that you can really ask. Do you like what you did at the other job?"] (CM06, female secretary, personal communication, June 4, 2016).[157]

This community member analyzes what she has observed in young people of university age. Her analysis may coincide with the idea of students being followers, immature and without guidance which could be a consequence of the lack of attention from their working parents. Also, people that live in this neighborhood conform to the idea of studying at private institutions in compliance with those that live in the same neighborhood (Kelman, 1958).

In the corregimiento of **Amelia Denis de Icaza**[158], the neighborhood is affected by the low income of its residents. It is described as noisy with

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[157] Original in Spanish: *"El estudiante que no tiene formalidad con sus metas, aquella persona que de repente no tiene un vínculo fijo con lo que realmente quisieras ser en la vida. … muchas veces hay personas que llegan a 27 y 30 años y todavía no saben lo que quieren hacer. De hecho he visto casos de personas que tienen ese rango de edades y cuando vas a ver su hoja de vida, han trabajado en diez lugares en distintas posiciones y no es algo que realmente tú le puedas preguntar ¿Te gusta eso que hiciste en el otro trabajo?"*

[158] Declared as corregimiento at the moment the District of San Miguelito was founded.

entertaining activities sponsored only by politicians; where you can find people of strong and conflictive character due to their life circumstances. Regarding determinants to university student dropout, the economic factor was mentioned at first. Then, crime and practices such as gender stereotyping. One member of this community said:

> [*…*in the case of my neighborhood, the culture of the neighborhood has a great influence on women. It has a great influence. There are girls where their own family says: "Instead of wasting your time there, with whom are you getting married? Someone who brings money here and if you do not want that, then start looking for yourself how you are going to get money, but we need money"] (CM08, female professor, personal communication, June 22, 2016).[159]

Among other issues mentioned as cultural practices, there were ways of living such as moving from their parents' house and living with a partner but not intending to form a family at an early age. As to community descriptions and influences on residents, practices associated to dropout decisions were to do with security issues and its relation with quality of life. They were also related to the levels of commitment with studies that young people have and common ambitions or lack thereof, as well as with high levels of consumerism. This consumerism depends on the power of acquisition a person has or the location of their community combined with stereotyping and peer pressure. In this sense, I agree with Savig & Schwartz (2000) when they propose that priorities in a person's life can change; and this can also happen as a consequence of the community where he or she lives.

6.2.2. Community effects on behavior

In general, 10 different behaviors among community families and members were elicited during the former dropout and community members' interviews. These behaviors include isolation, party culture, crime and drug abuse, lack of family values, bullying, family deprivation, and peer

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[159] Original in Spanish: *"…en el caso del barrio, la cultura del barrio influye bastante en la mujer sobre todo, influye mucho. Existen muchachas en donde su propia familia le dice: Ven acá tú en vez de estar perdiendo tu tiempo allá, con quién te vas a casar, alguien que traiga dinero aquí y si no quieres entonces empieza a buscar tú misma como vas a conseguir dinero, pero necesitamos dinero."*

pressure. From all these, family values, peer pressure and party culture were the most mentioned.

Former dropouts and community members asserted that crime and drug abuse have a strong influence in their communities. Contrastingly, a former dropout from Corregimiento de Rio Abajo, District of Panama elicited the well-known Panamanian saying: "El barrio no hace a la gente". This saying means that a person's behavior does not depend on where he lives or comes from. It is a common saying that contradicts the greater societal effects of drug abuse. She explained her take on the saying:

> [The neighborhood does not make the people because the neighborhood is not bad, bad people are the ones who live in that neighborhood. But since they do not know any other way out of that environment, they do not know anything other than stealing, killing, injuring, saying let's hang out, let's drink, let's smoke, let's do drugs, let's use marijuana, and any other kind of thing] (DO39, single female aviation inspector, personal communication, July 2, 2016).[160]

Certainly, this may be true; but to some extent, the neighborhood environment where a person lives has an effect on a person's behavior (Galster, 2012). It is a cycle were one person affects others with their behavior through imitation. Eventually, more people will conform to this behavior and will make it a practice (Kelman, 1958; Frese, 2015). This saying is in some way a motto of those who do not conform to the situation in their community but still have to live surrounded by it.

Of course, there are also nonconformists that come from hard neighborhoods or red zones and still succeed in their studies because of their effort and perseverance. These students do not comply with the community behavior standards and therefore lack of any influence in the community idiosyncrasy (Ridgeway, 1981; Forsyth, 2018).

It was also mentioned that due to delinquency issues, people practice isolation from their neighbors. These people believe that if they stay inside their homes without talking or connecting to others, this will help them to

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[160] Original in Spanish: "*El barrio no hace a la gente porque el barrio no es malo, la gente mala es la que vive en ese barrio. Pero como ellos no conocen otra manera de salir de ese ambiente, ellos no conocen otra cosa que no sea robar, matar, hurtar, decir vamos a parquear, vamos a tomar, vamos a fumar, vamos a fumar droga, vamos a consumir marihuana, cualquier otro tipo de cosa.*"

avoid any harm or negative eventualities in daily life; or even appear to be better than others in the same community. This practice, which I also understand as a consequence of nonconformity, is also perceived as people intending to project belonging to a higher social class while still living in the same neighborhood or community.

Two former dropouts specifically commented on the difficulties a young person can have in neighborhoods with drugs and crime. They explain the need to conform with the others in order to be accepted or even for survival purposes. A former dropout from Corregimiento de Pedregal, District of Panama commented on her experiences and observations:

> [To be able to leave your house and make friends, you have to smoke, otherwise you have to sell, if you don't sell, you have to kill.]

When asked about practices in general and even those practices that may have an effect on dropouts, she replied:

> [...the habit of you going and hanging out on that corner, whoever does not hang out cannot be from the street. That is because of the influence of people who prefer (to have) everything easy] (DO49, single housewife, personal communication, July 6, 2016).[161]

With her testimony, she helps us to perceive the level of peer pressure to conform in the regular activities found in the community. From this interviewees' eyes, there is a strong influence on taking a decision to belong or not to the community; and this is imposed by people that do not show positive values or goals. Thus, in this cycle, young people get involved whether they want to or not. During our conversation, this housewife expressed how this practice also involved her as a woman. Although she does not hang out on the corner, she has to conform or at least approve it.

These behaviors and the housewife's observation are consistent with what Bourdieu (1977) said about practices that "function at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions," that she has been somehow coerced to accept. At the end of the interview, she lamented her situation of not been able to finish university and talked about how her life

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[161] Original in Spanish: "*Para poder salir de tu casa y tener amistades, tienes que fumar, si no fumas tienes que vender, sino vendes, tienes que matar. -El hábito de que tú vas y parqueas en esa esquina, el que no parquea no puede ser de la calle. Eso es por la influencia de las personas que prefieren todo fácil.*"

would have been if she did not live in this community, which is consistent with what Coleman (1966) said about inequalities being carried along through adult life.

Regarding psychological bullying and peer pressure, bullying was alleged to be performed by grown-ups as something very common in neighborhoods where drugs and crime are prevalent. Crime is to be taught and seen as a way to make a living, as commented by a former dropout from **Corregimiento de Arnulfo Arias**[162], District of San Miguelito: ["...we are going to steal...do not study, that takes your time. See that I earn money easily this way..."] (DO44, single female assistant, personal communication, July 4, 2016).[163] Throughout the conversation, this interviewee explained that these behaviors are taught and not imitated, and are mostly practiced by gang members.

A party culture generation was also mentioned. The party culture generation are those who weigh a life of partying as being of greatest importance or at least engage in heavy partying during their university years.[164] As mentioned by a, former dropout and also local of this community, this age group appears to be more oriented towards satisfying their carnal needs than their spiritual and educational needs. She illustrates this behavior:

> [My environment was a party, at the university it was a party group that had a nightclub, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and sometimes Sunday, so at that time of mine the parties were at their peak apart from the vice...The atmosphere is pure hanging out and pure drinking, more people gather. At every corner they are taking their cars, listening to music and that is weekend, weekdays or when they feel like it they are doing that kind of vagrancy. Differences, they do not see the day, if it's a week, a weekend, they do not know it. Every day when they feel like it and have money, they turn on their music and

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[162] Founded on June 23, 1960.

[163] Original in Spanish: "…*vamos a robar… no estudies que eso te resta tiempo, mira que yo me gano la plata fácilmente haciendo de esta manera…*"

[164] Between 18 and 28 years old, considering that the standard age for university freshman is 18.

start drinking] (DO43, married female library assistant, personal communication, July 4, 2016).[165]

According to other former dropouts that live in this location, these are people that associate any social meeting with drinking, dancing and partying. Besides, another former dropout attests that this behavior is common in this same community and it is repeated regardless of the day of the week. She carried on describing her community as follows: [the environment is quite heavy in terms of people. Each one wants to live the problem of others, with gossip, lots of crime, lots of vice, lots of family disintegration] (DO44, single female office assistant, personal communication, July 4, 2016).[166] With these descriptions, I can sense that these two interviewees think that their community is filled with people that lack of values and aspirations. At the end of the interview, the latter interviewee expressed that she believed these people have weak minds, do not have criteria and do not know where they want to go in life.

Another interviewee, a former dropout from **Corregimiento de Mateo Iturralde**[167], District of San Miguelito, described the lack of family values as having a strong influence on the decision of dropping out. She stated that within family members there is always repetitive talk about how important it is to continue studying and pushing oneself to achieve such goals, but there is no real support towards the idea. She also mentioned that there is no respect for those who want to succeed (or study), since parties and get-togethers occur sometimes on a daily basis without caring about others living nearby or in the same household. Regarding this situation, she refers to her own experience:

> [No, the family do want you to progress. They want that, but they do not do their part. They plan meetings with friends at

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[165] Original in Spanish: "*Mi ambiente era fiesta, en la Universidad era un grupo de fiesta que teníamos discoteca, jueves, viernes, sábado y a veces domingo o sea que en ese tiempo mío las fiestas estaban en su apogeo aparte también el vicio… el ambiente es de puro parking y pura tomadera, más la gente se reúne. En cada esquina están tomando en sus carros, escuchando música y eso es fin de semana, días de semana o sea cuando a ellos les dé la gana ellos están haciendo ese tipo de vagancia. Diferencias, ellos no le ven el día, si es semana, fin de semana, ellos no saben de eso. Ellos todos los días cuando les da la gana y tienen plata, ellos prenden su música y se ponen a tomar.*"

[166] Original in Spanish: "*el ambiente es bastante pesado en cuanto a la gente, cada vez que quien vivir el mundo del problema ajeno, tan con el bochinche, mucha delincuencia, mucho vicio, mucha desintegración de parte de la familia*"

[167] Founded in 1960.

home, they go to bed very late, talking or drinking beer and they do not give you time to study anymore] (DO14, married housewife, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[168]

Putnam (2000) posits on the benefits of social capital for a better community life. I can relate it not to this party culture itself but to the networking benefit it brings to those who participate. Although, to this interviewee may look like a culture that lacks of aspirations, the socialization it brings can eventually turn into future benefit among the community and its locals.

Regarding aspirations and life priorities, Blumer (1986) explains the fact that priorities are adapted towards what or who surrounds us and their activities. So, in communities where this type of socialization takes place, people will adapt their priorities to what represents the most importance in their eyes. The constant repetition of how studies will help you succeed in life does not match the behavior found in these communities. According to what Blumer (1986) says, it may be because of a low rate of university completion in the community. Thus, locals are not surrounded by many others that have succeeded in this way. For example, there was the constant repetition among former dropout interviewees about the willingness a person has of moving out from poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods but not succeeding in this idea. This is because they are so used to their ways of living; where education is not the first option. An example of this situation is when adolescents are persuaded to excel in sports in order to succeed and make a difference, but without studying.

Television has a great influence on this kind of behavior. We, the audience, are presented with series full of crime, drugs, murder and so on. And, although most of these programs show that the good person is the hero in the end, the content still shows how lucrative selling drugs can be, how luxurious a gangster can live or how being popular is the best thing that could happen to a person. This observation leads me to agree with Cline (1975) on his thought about imitative learning and how people imitate what matters to them. They shape their attitudes and accept the behavior that is presented to them according to their perspectives.

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[168] Original in Spanish: "*No, la familia si quieren que tu progreses. Quieren, pero no ponen de su parte ya te digo, en las reuniones que hacen de amigos, las hacen en la casa, se acuestan tardísimo, conversando o tomando cervezas y ya no te dan tiempo a ti para estudiar.*"

There is patriarchal behavior still engraved in some Panamanian women and there are other cases. Interviewees in this study mentioned the case of housewives who, due to temporary unemployment or family matters, are expected to stay at home onwards. But, some women rather engage in endeavors that do not require an education such as selling illegal lottery tickets or raffles to increment the money flow in their household. One former dropout from **Corregimiento de Tocumen**[169], District of Panama, pointed out how a daughter follows the easy way of living that her mother procures, leaving her studies aside: [Look at the girl who was selling numbers (lottery tickets), she was teaching the same thing to her daughter. The daughter was in school and there was a time that she left school and she dedicated herself to selling numbers as well.] (DO10, single male insurance agent, personal communication, June 22, 2016).[170]

On another example, a former dropout made reference to the lack of responsibility some women have towards their house and family. She refers to a woman that has too much leisure time and no goals at all other than interest in other peoples' matters:

> [*…*they do not take care of their homes one hundred percent, but they are instead more aware of what other people do and women rather spend their time in other people's houses gossiping, do not do their house chores, do not take care of their children, do not take care of the husbands, they spend their time in the neighbors' houses.] (DO43, married library assistant, personal communication, July 4, 2016).[171]

These two interviewees stress the point that housewives are supposed to care for their families but instead pay attention to other people's business. It is a matter of being the woman only dedicated to house chores and its concurrence with the set of values acquired after the colonial period that lasts until today, which is consistent with what Alpizar (2015) comments on regarding the socio-cultural construction that promotes gender

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[169] Founded in June, 1960.

[170] Original in Spanish: "*…Mira la muchacha que vendía número le estaba enseñando lo mismo a la…la hija. La hija estaba en la escuela y hubo un tiempo que se salió de la escuela y se dedicó a vender número también.*"

[171] Original in Spanish: "*…no se ocupen al cien por ciento en sus hogares, sino que están más pendiente de lo que hacen las otras personas y las mujeres más bien se la pasan metida en la casa ajena bochincheando, no hacen oficios, no atienden a sus hijos, no atienden a los esposos, se la pasan metidas en las casas ajenas.*"

inequalities in society. This patriarchal construct that has also been enforced by religious beliefs spread in the Isthmus after the colonial period (Miller, 2017).

In a similar view, it was also pointed out that there are community members that are not interested in self-improvement but rather just living without a purpose. These negatively influence younger generations and are situated at the negative end of family values, as expressed by a former dropout from **Corregimiento de Rio Abajo**[172], District of Panama: ["Laziness, which also comes from the family."] (DO08, single male legal assistant, personal communication, June 22, 2016).[173]

Behaviors such as laziness, general lack of interest and gossiping, as already mentioned, will further develop into negative outcomes (Frese, 2015). For people that live with these mentalities, those who study are not abnormal unwelcome among them. Thus, those who study are under constant peer pressure not to study and are invited to join other type of activities. Maybe they are seen as nonconformists (Ridgeway, 1981; Forsyth, 2018). On the other hand, practices such as studying, going to church and working without salary reservations are seen as good practices oriented towards success. Once again, there is a strong criticism with regard to the instruction of values. A former dropout shared her observations on this point:

> [Well, culture I think they do not know about culture, but most people, above all young people who are growing, are the ones who grow up without habits of religion, without school habits, without cultural habits, without any habit that can take them on the right path, right? Continue the studies, go to church, work, they think about other things.] (DO43, single male legal assistant, personal communication, July 4, 2016).[174]

In relation to values, two former dropouts that share and follow Christian beliefs and values[175] voiced concern saying that there was a lack of family

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[172] *Fundado* el 18 de junio de 1937.

[173] Original in Spanish: *"La vagancia; eso viene también de familia."*

[174] Original in Spanish: "*Bueno, cultura creo que ellos no conocen la cultura, pero la mayoría de personas, la juventud sobre todo que va creciendo, es la que va creciendo sin hábitos de religión, sin hábitos de escuela, sin hábitos de cultura, sin ningún hábito de que lo pueda llevar a lo que es el camino correcto ¿no? seguir los estudios, ir a la iglesia, trabajar, ellos piensan otras cosas.*"

[175] These two interviewees professed the Christian evangelical faith.

values that should be inculcated by family members and not in schools as some others think. They alleged that nowadays they observe a very small percentage of young people that have been raised practicing Christian customs[176] and have a clear focus on what they want. This was also related to the great influence the promotion of church activities in the communities has and how the involvement of people in their activities help inculcate values.

6.2.3.   Older communities and newer communities

I then started to compare impressions between the two districts and their corregimientos. I found new neighborhoods to be different from older ones since they are at new locations with many new families moving into them. These newly-weds families bring a different way of thinking to their community and will conform to the activities found in the new community. Most people populating these new neighborhoods are professionals or professionals-to-be in the upcoming years after moving. This is different to the oldest neighborhoods, situated in the city center, where finishing high school is the main goal of students and also their parents, while attending university is seen as unlikely and sometimes unachievable.

During focus group #2, 'social relationships' was the factor identified as the most influential to students who drop out after economic issues. These refer to relationships within the community, including relationships between friends, neighbors and couples. During this discussion, there was an agreement on how the community, those who surround us in the community, can influence our decision-making as we want to conform to them.

On another opinion, participants in focus group #2 also discussed people who have emigrated to newer communities and have changed their lives with studies and success after imitating what other community members do. This corresponds to what Mead (1934) states about how society becomes the social control factor and findings from Agence de la Santé et des Services Sociaux de Montréal (2008) on children's learning attitudes

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[176] The majority of the Panamanian population professes some religion or creed, only 7.6% declare that they do not profess any religion. The creed of greatest report is the Catholic Church which comprises 63.2% of the population, followed by the Evangelical Churches with 25%. Other faiths have the following representation in the population: Adventist 1.3%, Jehovah Witnesses 1.4%, Mormon 0.6%, Buddhist 0.5%, Jewish 0.1%, Episcopal 0.03% and other 0.3%. Retrieved on October, 30, 2018 from www.ministeriopublico.gob.pa – Encuesta de Hogares 2015-2016

and values. In the discussion, moving to a new neighborhood was mostly related to those who got married or got a new family and moved out of their parents' house. This idea brings up a very interesting contrast between the previously discussed popular saying about *el barrio* and the influence the neighborhood itself has on a person's development. This influence invites observants to acquire aspirations and different perspectives for their future. This idea was specifically expressed during the discussion:

> [And they want to go to university and they are going, that is, the generation that came after me, they graduated and I moved, and I see that they are doing well and I also want to be doing well as they are. So I'm going to finish the university. So, if it influences, it influences so much that sometimes it is detrimental, but sometimes it also teaches you what to strive for] (FG2-E07, personal communication, April 29, 2017).[177]

Once again, the participants in this discussion also elicited the popular saying about *el barrio* and argued about how a person can become a victim while being absorbed by their own environment, meaning the neighborhood where a person lives. According to Sherwood (1989), having aspirations involves a lot of effort to accomplish the goal. If there is no goal, there is no aspiration. In this sense, people that are involved and consumed by the community will not invest in making efforts to change their situation. However, there will always be exceptions to this as other people can hit rock bottom.

6.3.   Juega vivo as a cultural practice

Social and cultural norms are traditions that over time and through space continue to change the structure of a society or community. Their role is important within daily relations since they facilitate understanding within members of the community. Because norms show us how people perform and think, they also influence other people's behavior (Frese, 2015). I can relate to practices in Panamanian society such as working for others, social

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[177] Original in Spanish: "*Y quieren ir a la Universidad y están yendo o sea que pasa también de que la generación que venía después de mí, se graduó y yo me mudé y yo veo que ellos están bien y yo también quiero estar bien. Entonces voy a terminar la Universidad. Entonces, si influye, influye, influye tanto a veces perjudica, pero a veces también te enseña a que debes esforzarte, pues.*"

conformism, poverty mind and *juega vivo* culture[178] that have become cultural norms.

The *juega vivo* behavior or culture has become an issue that Panamanians find normal in a so-called corrupted society. Wilson (2007) uses the term *viveza criolla*, which is a synonym to *juega vivo*, to denote the manner of oral communication among Argentinian citizens and streetwise attributes as desirable.

The Word *viveza* comes from *vivo*, which denotes a person with mental agility able to quickly respond. On this, Wilson (2007) comments on Meyer (1965), "the essence of this awkward attribute is being smart at the expense of another and also to have a lightning response to everything" (p. 38). Wilson (2007) matches this behavior to the agility of speech that a person gets after practicing quickening their talking while walking in the street.

In Panama, *juega vivo* has been historically embraced as a cultural practice of most of the population to the point that foreigners find prominent and even government agencies cannot deny it. On this matter, a married female merchant and former dropout interviewee commented on this issue and even identifies this conduct as cultural: [I see that the boys spend their time in other things, they are more interested in going out, in *juega vivo*, in making a mess] (DO03, married female merchant, personal communication, June 21, 2016).[179]

In this sense, having the *juega vivo* behavior take over has become a serious cultural and moral flaw. The predominance of this conduct may be the cause of repetitive crises, fading of social justice and the emergence of economic dependence as it comes out of our cultural values and beliefs that

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[178] Although it is intrinsically embedded in Panamanians and also South American cultures, it is somehow difficult to define the "juega vivo" culture as there are scarce scientific sources or written opinions. According to several articles in the Panamanian press, juega vivo is a typical egocentric behavior of the Panamanian characterized by shameless attitudes and disrespect that have become a subculture incorporated in the Panamanian culture. It is formed by a set of behaviors that violate social norms or moral rules, and whose repercussion is the direct or indirect affectation of others. It has become a "modus vivendi." It is present in all the circles that make up society and is a form of unethical interaction. It consists of a productive way in which a person tries to find easy solutions to their problems and needs. Despite being seen as an incorrect way to find solutions, the Panamanian has seen it as a normal way of acting and quite acceptable. To be a "juega vivo" is to live in an opportunistic way and comfortably at the expense of others, without working for it. This behavior is also known as "idiosincracia indigena" or "viveza criolla"

[179] Original in Spanish: "*Veo que los muchachos pasan el tiempo en otras cosas, se interesan más por andar, por pasear, por el juega vivo, por el desorden.*"

have become the norm in our society. This norm has an effect on our way of seeing and doing things either as individuals or as members of a group. It has an impact on our society's way of living, economic activities, government and civil society. On this, a former dropout commented: [What was the culture in the neighborhood? What cultural aspects do you see in the neighborhood? ... games, vice, *juega vivo*…] (DO38, married female accountant, personal communication, July 2, 2016).[180]

This behavior is undeniably linked to negative attitudes and thus it has become a philosophy of progressing with the least effort while avoiding rules. It has reduced our society's sense of responsibility and consideration for others and it does not distinguish social class, gender or age. In its extremes, it can be portrayed as an opportunistic depredation without hesitation on the means and consequences attached to it. For some Panamanians, *el juega vivo* has become a national cultural identity as it promotes informal management of matters and actions of the Panamanian citizens. It is a living game and a common practice deeply rooted in the culture of our society.

6.3.1. Juega vivo and poverty mindset

The *juega vivo* culture and the poverty mindset were also mentioned during the interviews. This opportunistic culture is often related to poverty mindset. Accoding to Janse Van Rensburg (2013), there are bonds of poverty between people, family and even community that are difficult to break from a psychological point of view. The author relates in his research how poverty itself empowered a woman to succeed in life in her way to avoid poverty.

But the poverty mindset that interviewees in this study refer to is the one that keeps a person from succeeding. According to this perspective, being poor as a result of financial scarcity plus unfortunate and/or inadequate living conditions reduces the already limited success-oriented mindset and results in detrimental behavior and ineffective decision making (Mullainathan, 2011). From a social point of view, people with poverty mindset who live in communities that have suffered from economic hardship may experience the negative stereotyping of poverty. According

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[180] Original in Spanish: "*Cuál era la cultura en el barrio? ¿Qué aspectos culturales viste en el barrio? … juego, vicio, juega vivo.*"

to Fell & Hewstone (2015), the person's self-evaluation and performance can be affected by the stereotypic perception of a specific group or community. This may also affect their self-perception of capability for success.

On this note, Gerardo Guerrel Castillo[181], an experienced Panamanian psychologist, states that this poverty mindset occurs when rationalization of poverty comes into play; meaning that those who are exposed to poverty learn to be poor and live like they are poor. In this sense, those children who experience a scarcity of resources in their households and environment will learn from their frustrations, limitations and other people's experiences in a negative way. They will identify with the scarcity and consequently will learn to believe that adversities are inevitable.

As an example, Guerrel Castillo (2018) illustrates the poverty mindset making reference to a person, a parent that is affected with poverty mindset while choosing a school for his children. This parent will rather choose the school with the lower standards as he believes his child is not going to meet them or will not finish studies in a satisfactory way. At the same time, he also makes reference to parents that feel sure that teachers tend to be more tolerant to students who are not outstanding at school since they may suffer from attention deficit and/or learning disabilities. Poverty mindset prevents people from searching for alternatives to success and while failing to strengthen values that can help people get out of poverty. Those used to this behavior expect to live marginalized, just like their ancestors. These people are also immersed in a poverty culture, which does not allow them to change their status on their own.

6.3.2. Juega vivo culture and morality

The juega vivo behaviour is surrounded by cultural and moral patterns that contribute to its survival. It was not inserted in the society; it was learned and lived. And, different to conformity and norms, it is not imposed. For example, extreme individualism and lack of ability to cooperate in community goals, which is decisive for the overall development of communities, can be a behavioral pattern that can lead to moral disruption

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[181] Director of the Panamanian Institute of Labor Studies at the Ministry of Labor and Labor Development, Panama.

and therefore, maintain *juega vivo*. Also, blaming our problems on someone else while making others conform to the idea exacerbates it. This way of living is often called the "law of the least effort" as a means of achieving goals, helping to endure and maintain the cycle of poverty as stated by Guerrel Castillo (2018). He claims that this way of living creates a dependency - people get used to waiting until others solve their own problems or do things for them.

Pulido Ritter[182] (2005), relates *juega vivo* to the absence of principles and undefined values. He states that this practice has nothing to do with pragmatism, as it is seen by those who have not been formally educated. He states: [Juega vivo prevails where there is a crisis of legitimacy of values and principles...].[183] To this, Pulido Ritter also indicates that whether values come from Christian doctrines or secular beliefs, they are characterized by a lack of credibility, trust and corruption. Meanwhile, j*uega vivo* enforces the survival of power and interest. It prevails as accepted norm within social groups and carried on by the involvement of those seen as leaders and sometimes justified in the name of any cause. It is important to point out that the practice of *juega vivo* is not restricted to lower classes or only poor people. It has become a culture, it is well understood by all and never discussed.

With respect to educational matters, according to Goodin (2006), because *juega vivo* is the norm for many Panamanians, pursuing educational growth does not represent a way to change economic status or any status. This practice definitely affects personal development. And, although practicing *juega vivo* can lead to a positive outcome for someone, it is a net negative if embedded into a way of living.

6.3.3.   Juega vivo as a corrupt behavior

Saad (2014) comments on how susceptible Panamanians are to corruption, where civic values lack and corruption is seen as normal and acceptable. He infers that although Panama is a country with a great potential, in a society that lacks honesty, mediocrity lies in the way its citizens think.

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[182] Prof. Dr. Luis Pulido Ritter is professor at University of Panama. PhD in Philosophy and Sociology from the Free Universitaet Berlin.

[183] Original in Spanish: "*El juega vivo impera donde hay una crisis de legitimidad de los valores y los principios…*"

Juega vivo is a system of exchange of influences in which anybody (i.e. family, friends or coworkers) offers or trades something that will help a person benefit better - in greater quantity or earlier. It may include the person that offers and/or another person acting as *palanca* or pull[184] This exchange of influences system has also become the *modus vivendi* of many Panamanians that instead of helping others in good faith, profit from their needs. The profit gained from this practice may be legal or not. When legal, sometimes it can be seen as a very informal way of bartering.

Prof. Dr. Eduardo Espino Lopez (2004), Psychiatrist and National Head of Mental Health, Social Security Fund (CSS) defines *juega vivo* as:

> […It is a type of corruption, it is a pattern of attitudes and behaviors of high frequency in the population, whose main motivation is to obtain immediate benefits and benefits at any cost, as long as they represent an opportunity to earn something with the least intellectual or physical effort. It is a behavior aimed at finding, with advantage over another person that is used as an instrument, a material or psychological benefit by easier means than those formally established.][185]

Regarding this practice, an interesting point of view is that *juega vivo* is also a way to approach situations in life. Therefore, those people who do not have an educational level that they can rely on to face difficult situations may be tempted to practice *juega vivo*. However, it is also believed that religious guidelines embedded in the minds of Panamanians (i.e. the ethics and values that can be derived from them), will help free people from corruption and for practicing *juega vivo*. Former dropouts and participants of focus group #2, expressed that the closer a person grows up with religious guidelines, the better the surrounding environment for that person will be. They specifically said:

> […every person must develop personally through studies; through the knowledge of the word of God; and that enables

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[184] Word used to denote Influence.

[185] Original in Spanish: "…*es un tipo de corrupción, es un patrón de actitudes y comportamientos de alta frecuencia en la población, que tiene como motivación principal obtener ventajas y beneficios inmediatos a cualquier costo, siempre que representen una oportunidad de ganar algo con el menor esfuerzo intelectual o físico. Es una conducta dirigida a encontrar, con ventaja sobre otra persona que es utilizada como instrumento, un beneficio material o psicológico por vías más fáciles que las formalmente establecidas.*"

the person to be able to make good decisions at a time that it is needed] (DO02, married male merchant, personal communication, June 21, 2016).[186]

[I trust God very much. Right now I leave everything to Him and He has led me on the right path] (DO29, married saleswoman, personal communication, June 27, 2016).[187]

[…if God wants you to study, you will study, because God is the one who guides us, right? And if God wants to give us something else that is not to study, then we have to look first for God's direction, so...] (FG02, personal communication, April 29, 2017).[188]

6.4. Conclusion

It is not my intention to portray communities in the District of Panama and District of San Miguelito as bad places to any extent. But it is shown that dropping out from studies is intrinsically seen as connected to community influences with a negative effect on education and daily life. However, this is a topic that still needs to be explored to understand and evaluate to what extent the living environment or community is connected to the dropout phenomenon.

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[186] Original in Spanish: *"…toda persona debe desarrollarse personalmente a través de los estudios; a través del conocimiento de la palabra de Dios y eso va a hacer que la persona pueda estar capacitada para tomar buenas decisiones en un momento que se necesite."*

[187] Original in Spanish: *"…confío mucho en Dios. Ahorita mismo ya todo se lo dejo a Él y Él me ha llevado por el buen camino"*

[188] Original in Spanish: *"…si Dios quiere que uno estudie, uno va a estudiar, porque Dios es el que nos guía ¿verdad? Y si Dios nos quiere dar otra cosa que no es estudio, entonces tenemos que buscar es primeramente la dirección de Dios, así que…"*

7. CHAPTER   Now I feel whole. Thank God I dropped out.

The Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences winner in 1998, Amartya Sen, challenged the conventional concept of measuring human development by economic growth and GNP by positing that freedom of action increases people's access and opportunities to everything they are motivated to value (Sen, 2014). Human development, one of the branches of development[189] , encompasses the evolution of the human lifespan in relation to the three domains, physical, cognitive and psychosocial development. Physical development is related to the evolution of the body and the brain, skills, and physical health. Cognitive development has to do with the evolution of capacities (i.e. learning, understanding, reasoning and creating). Psychosocial development is associated with social interactions, emotions, attitudes, identity, personality, beliefs and values.

Thus, human development goes beyond the increase or decrease of a country's income. Human development is an approach by which a person undertakes the richness of their own life, rather than focusing on economic prosperity as the only means of fulfilment. It includes the construction of an environment in which people can lead a productive and creative life according to their needs and interests. Thus, human development itself is much more than earning an academic title or the pursuit of economic prosperity.

In this sense, at the personal level, development involves expanding opportunities so that each person can live a significant life for themselves. Thus, personal development is the reflection process of every individual aiming to understand who they are and unfold their potential as human beings to the fullest. When we refer to personal development, the common assumption is that there will be reference to learning or training for a job in order to increase finances and thus obtain so-called personal growth.

Personal development as Donati and Watts (2005) explain, is the process that results in the outcome of personal growth. It is deliberate growth (i.e. spiritual growth, academic growth, pursuit of happiness, quality of life, etc.) that brings out talent and capabilities, making a human being become more

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[189] SID Israel (2018) gives a definition to development as "a process that creates growth, progress, positive change or the addition of physical, economic, environmental, social and demographic components." This is a very broad definition that comprises many elements involved and that can be explained separately. The increase of these elements will gradually lead to a society improvement as it is the goal of development as a whole.

conscious, whole and healthy while accomplishing dreams and aspirations, and influencing the society around them.

People aspire to different things in life depending on what matters to them. They reflect to understand themselves, and learn to improve and develop into the person they want to be. Therefore, for the purpose of studying the personal development one has had after dropping out from their studies, I will use the following definition: personal development is the conscious improvement and fulfilment a person achieves that takes place over the course of their life.

Former dropouts were asked about their understanding of the concept of personal development and reported their perceptions according to their feelings, observations and life experiences. Regarding the concept of personal development, interviewees tended to describe it as material, emotional and spiritual growth that could be accomplished with education, goal achievement, or health and long life.

I asked former dropout interviewees to consider that personal development itself derives from human development. And, as it has psychological and sociological connotations, it can be perceived as emotional processes (Broughton & Riegel, 1977; Webb & Grimwood, 2003) or individual interactions (Mead, 1934; Donati and Watts; 2005) that lead to the enrichment of the person itself. With their individual responses and having clarified the concept, former dropouts showed enough understanding to continue with the interview.

Three dropout interviewees illustrate this idea by commenting on their material and emotional development, including the importance of health and also sacrificing for their family as a matter of personal development. The first interviewee, a former dropout, explains how important her family is and more specifically, her daughter's success in life. She makes clear that she would rather forget about her own goals to fulfill her daughter's goals. This is a very common way of thinking for those Panamanians who did not accomplish what they desired such as graduating from school or university. Therefore, this interviewee's new perspective on personal development is redirected to being a parent (in some cases this is similar for the oldest sibling) that supports someone in the family in order to succeed. She continues to explain her position as follows:

> [...for me, my development as a mother, my development as
> a professional, as a wife, as a daughter, as a sister. Because

as a mom, I want to be everything for my daughter. The best thing that she can have, what I could not have, to offer her the best to the point that I would be willing to give up my own goals so that my daughter could achieve what is going to make her successful] (DO23, single female assistant, personal communication, 25/6/2016).[190]

Although this feeling of achievement is diverted to a second person (i.e. son, daughter or sibling), the idea of success started in the mind of the parent as he or she developed a self-image of wanting to accomplish. In the end, the parent will not only benefit by accomplishing a personal perception of success and fulfillment, but also contribute to their surrounding society (HDRO, 1990). This is also consistent to what Broughton & Riegel (1977) said about procuring effectiveness by accomplishing dreams and aspirations.

Another former dropout has a very individualistic point of view about his personal development. He points out the importance of health related to life accomplishments. I can relate this person to people that do not fear having to struggle but rather take advantage of it. The interviewee says:

[I feel that what one needs to develop as a person is only health and life. My concept is that after one has health and life, the rest I feel that it is like a story. Are there difficulties? Yes. But it's a story, because even in the midst of the difficulties that there are and as long as you have health and life, you can pass any adversity] (DO16, married male technician, personal communication, 23/6/2016).[191]

With these words, I can relate his feelings and emotions to taking action first towards priorities. Thus, he clearly states that health and life (being alive) are the most important things and these are not connected to his social environment.

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[190] Original in Spanish: "…*para mí, mi desarrollo como mamá, mi desarrollo como profesional, como esposa, como hija, como hermana. Porque como mamá yo quiero ser para mi hija un todo. Lo mejor que ella tenga, lo que yo no pude tener, ofrecerle lo mejor al punto de que yo estaría dispuesta a renunciar a mis mismas metas para que mi hija lograra lo que a ella la va a hacer exitosa.*"

[191] Original in Spanish: "*Yo siento que lo que uno necesita para desarrollarte como persona solamente es la salud y la vida. Porque después, mi concepto es que después que uno tenga salud y vida pues lo demás siento yo que es como un cuento. ¿Hay dificultades?, sí. Pero es un cuento, porque eh, aun en medio de las dificultades que haya y tu tengas salud y vida, tu puedes pasar cualquier adversidad.*"

Another interviewee, a former dropout, referred to his personal development from a spiritual point of view. He made an illustration of what the Bible says about instructions for living. He explains the required connection between growing physically, spiritually and in knowledge by accessing education in order to procure personal development:

> [...the Bible says that Jesus Christ, when he was a child, he knew that he grew in stature and wisdom. So we have to grow both physically and spiritually and in our education. So, as one reads, one learns, as one studies one is more prepared to face the world. Then, every person must develop personally through studies, through the knowledge of the word of God and that will make the person be able to make good decisions at a time that is needed. So, for me, personal development has to do with these things that I mentioned] (DO02, married male merchant, personal communication, 21/6/2016).[192]

This last example portrays not only the importance of faith and precepts but also the importance of connecting these to education. This thought supports what Whiting & Whiting (1975) stated about the characteristics of cultural systems and its values in relation to an individual's development.

These three examples are evidence that personal development depends on the eyes and feelings of every individual (Broughton & Riegel, 1977). At the same time, personal development is also determined by social interactions within the individual's environment as claimed by Mead (1934) and Whiting & Whiting (1975).

7.1. The perception of personal development

It is normal for society to view dropping out as a failure or else for it to carry a negative connotation. However, having dropped out from university does not imply that one is a failure in life. In this research, only 20% of dropout participants felt embarrassed because of not having continued or finished university. Agreeing with Schalock, et al. (2016) and Claes et al.

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[192] Original in Spanish: *"…la Biblia habla que Jesucristo cuando estaba niño, él sabía que él crecía en estatura y sabiduría. Entonces nosotros tenemos que crecer tanto físicamente como espiritualmente y en nuestra educación. Entonces a medida que, que uno lee, que uno se capacita, que uno estudia está más, eh, preparado para enfrentar al mundo, entonces toda persona debe desarrollarse personalmente a través de los estudios; a través del conocimiento de la palabra de Dios y eso va a hacer que la persona pueda estar capacitada para tomar buenas decisiones en un momento que se necesite. Así que para mí desarrollo personal tiene que ver con estas cosas que mencioné."*

(2012), students who have dropped out from their studies express a lack of motivation towards the future and also lack focus regarding their personal improvement. In the case of former dropouts in this study, they do not rely on institutional policies that encourage follow-up support, but students still look forward to learning new things that make them feel successful. To explain this, I provide three cases.

In the first case, the student was very interested in pursuing a program with the aim of working as a professional in his field. After dropping out, the student will try to engage in other educational opportunities outside university (such as vocational training) or register in professional courses (paid courses). The student will do this in order to acquire some knowledge about other kinds of remunerated activities (e.g. manual or technical courses taught in vocational institutions). Two former dropouts commented on this:

> [Here at the INADEH I've taken handicraft courses; I've taken a dressmaking course; I've taken a recycling course, a Christmas handicraft course, now I'm in English. I've taken everything I think is within my reach] (DO14, married housewife, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[193]

> [I have my son and he is studying, he is already in high school. I have to support him economically for studies, so at the moment I am studying small courses that do not last so long to be able to advance in some other aspects] (DO15, single male mechanic, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[194]

In these two examples, former dropouts sought out other areas of education. As an end goal, educational opportunities were taken for the purpose of future business incursions.

In a second case, the student's family or social circle respects his dropout decision as they knew there were other existing situations that affected him such as family matters, economic destabilization, and/or other significant

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[193] Original in Spanish: *"…aquí en el INADEH yo he cogido cursos de tembleques; yo he cogido curso de modistería; yo he cogido curso de, de reciclaje, de navidad ahora estoy en Inglés, he cogido todo lo que yo creo que está en mi alcance."*

[194] Original in Spanish: *"tengo a mi hijo y está estudiando, ya está en secundaria tengo que apoyarlo económicamente para los estudios, entonces de momento estoy estudiando cursos pequeños que no duren tanto tiempo para poder avanzar en alguna otra, otros aspectos."*

goals and priorities. Two former dropouts provided their experience on this as follows:

> [Outside of academia, well I would say that in the religious. I could graduate from the Pentecostal Bible Center of the Tabernacle of Faith.[195] I could participate, and be a member of the church and faithfully support their work and the Lord. So I feel happy with those achievements that I have accomplished] (DO16, married male manager, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[196]

> […my mom did not take it well and my sister said: "well, you will know, you work on that and you will know if it suits you or not." But they have always supported me] (DO18, divorced housewife, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[197]

In these two examples, former dropouts relate the importance they give to the social environment that surround them. The first example, while being able to participate in religious activities and support God's work, and the second example, the unconditional support of the family, even if the decision of dropping out was not approved of.

In a third case, there is a belief that going to university makes a person enter into debt. Therefore it is a better idea to get a job that does not need a diploma and as an employee, the dropout student will be further promoted with time. In other cases, the sole fact of attending a private university sometimes makes a person take important choices in their life contrasting studies with family income. On this, a former dropout explained his experience:

> [I had lost my job, that's why the university debt was increased. That is a double-edged sword. If you do not pay on time, the account keeps growing. When I managed to get back into university again, I could lower the debt a bit, but I was not given a chance to enroll again. Then I had to leave my studies because obviously I was working to bring something to my

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[195] Evangelical Church located in Juan Diaz, District of Panama. *Tabernáculo de la Fe*.

[196] Original in Spanish: *"Fuera de lo académico, bueno lo dijera en lo religioso que bueno pude lograr graduarme del Centro Bíblico Pentecostal del Tabernáculo de la Fe, eh…he podido pues participar, eh y ser miembro pues de, de esa iglesia y apoyar pues fielmente a la obra y del señor, así que yo me siento contento con esos logros que he obtenido"*

[197] Original in Spanish: *"…mi mamá no lo tomó bien y mi hermana si decía: "bueno tú sabrás, tú trabajas de eso y tú sabrás si te conviene o no" o sea de mi familia sí, siempre me han apoyado."*

family. The debt grew until I reached a cap. Nowadays, they do not call me anymore, but I still owe six hundred dollars] (DO10, single male insurance agent, personal communication, June 22, 2016.[198])

This former dropout, as of year 2019, is still an insurance agent. He does not need a university diploma for what he does. Personal development is not always attached to university studies in order to become a professional. These examples attest that for these former dropouts, personal development is more related to the fulfilment of priorities, aspirations and goals.

7.1.1. Perception of the outcomes

Outcomes from dropping out of university were perceived in various ways by the former dropouts in this study. From an emotional point of view, former dropouts expressed disappointment for not completing their studies and also a great disadvantage because of the reduced possibility of completing their studies at their age. For some of them, having dropped out from university produced feelings of intense sadness for their unaccomplished dreams and also a direct negative effect on their self-esteem.

For instance, focus group #1 pointed out that if there were attempts to return to university, those attempts would be futile because of the need to adapt to new methodologies based on academic plans that have changed with time. Aging was also a concern to those in this group who dropped out many years ago. This focus group also talked about how the technological revolution has shocked some of them and of their fear of not being able to keep pace with the younger generations that attend classes. The discussion followed:

> [E02: The study method is different from when they started their university studies. It's very different. Things change, even the administration with the paperwork. The teachers do not

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[198] Original in Spanish: "*yo había quedado sin trabajo por eso fue que la acreditación universitaria se aumentó. Ese es una arma doble filo si tú no pagas a tiempo y se fue creciendo la cuenta, cuando logré meterme en la Universidad pude bajar un poco la deuda pero no me dio para matricularme nuevamente sino que tenía que terminar de pagar la Universidad. Entonces me tuve que salir porque obviamente yo trabajaba para llevar algo a la a mi familia. La deuda fue creciendo hasta que llego a un tope. Hoy en día ya, ya no me llaman pero todavía ahí sale que debo seiscientos dólares.*"

have the same teaching methodology as they had when the university program began.

> E01: Apart from that also the curricula change. So, for example, if I want to enter the program that I left now, I would have to adapt; and in fact I was reviewing and making a comparison between what I took and what I have to take, and the truth is that they changed almost all the subjects and I would have to take a lot of subjects that I did not take at that time. And that in fact is not convenient for me right now] (FG01, E02, E01, personal communication, April 27, 2017).[199]

For these former dropouts, fulfilling their dream of finishing their studies was far from their reality. It is normal that over time universities incorporate new themes and methods into their curricula. This means that for these students, a change in the curriculum was perceived as negative because of their inability to continue the same program with the credits they already earned. According to Sherwood (1989), in this situation they saw their aspirations truncated not only by their decision to drop out but also by the loss of their previous investment.

Students' emotions being constantly affected during the process of attending university, dropping out and then thriving to succeed in life was repeatedly mentioned during former dropouts' interviews. Having dropped out from university filled these people with emotions such as sadness and low self-esteem, despair, and frustration because of their financial situation and conformism out of frustration as declared by this former dropout:

> […I felt like in a way that many people were already, they had already graduated. They have finished and they asked me: "When are you going to finish the university?" When are you going to get into the university? You...you have good jobs, you have to take advantage now. It affected me because I feel that if I had not done it (deserted), because today, at my age, I think I would have had more than four things that I do not have. It would have been much better and it wouldn't cross my mind if I had not finished university, I would have had a good position and doing what I like] (DO09, married female

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[199] Original in Spanish: *"E02: Ya el método de estudio es diferente a cuando ellos iniciaron sus estudios universitarios. Es muy diferente. Las cosas cambian, hasta la misma administración con los papeleos. Los profesores no tienen la misma metodología de enseñanza como tenían cuando se inició la carrera universitaria." "E01: Aparte de eso también los planes de estudios cambian. Entonces, por ejemplo, si yo quiero entrar ahora a la carrera que yo dejé, tendría que adecuarme; y de hecho estuve revisando y haciendo un cotejo entre lo que yo di y lo que tengo que dar, y la verdad es que cambiaron casi todas las materias y tendría que dar muchísimas materias que no di en aquel tiempo. Y que ya de hecho no me sirven ahorita."*

marketing manager, personal communication, June 22, 2016).[200]

In this particular case, this woman not only felt frustrated because of her own decision to drop out but also the constant pressure from her now graduated peers increased this feeling to the point she started questioning herself. Ironically, her peers only intended to motivate her to continue studying. To some extent, at her age (as she expressed) it turned into tormenting thoughts. As of today, although this woman works as a manager, she could not fulfil her dreams. This example supports what Van Bragt et al. (2011) commented regarding Vermunt (1992) about the stereotyping that exists when labeling losers and winners with respect to graduating. Therefore, for this woman, the outcome of dropping out from university was not an inability to finish but rather not being able to do what she would like.

However, having a marketing manager position, as the interviewee does, supports what Schnepf (2005) claims. Although a person has dropped out from university, they can have more opportunities than the one that never attended. Another former dropout also commented on this as follows:

> [Sometimes you sit down and think about it and say: what a fool! I would have finished. I only lacked a couple of subjects, but then you also think about the things that you have experienced since the time you dropped out until now. And you think about everything that is left to you by experience and one becomes stronger and can achieve better things in life. Try to be better] (DO25, single female payroll assistant, personal communication, June 25, 2016).[201]

Another former dropout, a married male driver, expressed his sadness from not accomplishing his plans. He also stated how his situation invited him to consider sacrificing for his spouse:

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[200] Original in Spanish: "*me sentía como de una manera como que muchas personas estaban ya, se han graduado; han terminado y pues me decían: "¿Cuándo vas a terminar la Universidad?"¿Cuándo te vas a meter a la Universidad? Tú…tú tienes buenos trabajos, tú tienes que aprovechar ahora". Me afecto porque siento que si no lo hubiera hecho (desertado), pues hoy en día yo, a mi edad, creo que hubiese tenido más de cuatro cosas que no tengo. O sea hubiese estado mucho mejor y no me pasariá por la cabeza pensar si yo no hubiese terminado la Universidad, hubiese tenido un buen puesto de lo que me gusta.*"

[201] Original in Spanish: "*A veces uno se sienta y lo piensa y dice: ¡Qué tontai hubiera terminado. Nada más me faltaban un par de materias, pero después también uno piensa en las cosas que ha vivido desde el tiempo que desertó hasta ahora. Y piensa que todo le queda por experiencia y uno se hizo más fuerte y puede lograr mejores cosas en la vida. Intentar ser mejor.*"

[Actually if it affected me, it affected me because I felt sadness. I had something planned in my mind and as I always say, the world goes round. My wife expressed to me what was happening, and my decision at that moment was for her to continue her studies and it turned out very well] (DO20, personal communication, June 25, 2016).[202]

Alexandrova (2005) states that goal accomplishment produces happiness in life, but it also depends on the life priorities a person has. For this man, dropping out from university caused him sadness. The outcome of dropping out was merely negative as he could not fulfill his aspiration. However, it also triggered a change in his priorities at the moment he decided that he was going to give his wife the opportunity to study to his wife.

One of the participants in focus group discussion #1 alleged that because of her immaturity and not having a vision in life, she succumbed to the great peer pressure that she encountered in her community at that time. She was also subject to a lack of orientation at home and at the university. But, at the same time, she expressed a spiritual relief at having a second chance in life, while getting to know God. Similarly, a former dropout, acknowledged that because of an immature behavior at that time, he failed. He specifically said:

[Because even though I had a woman, I was not mature, I say it now repented because I am a Christian, but I made many bad decisions…](DO02, married male merchant, personal communication, June 21, 2016).[203]

With respect to the topic of maturity or lack of maturity during university studies, another interviewee, referred to being disconnected from his former student life and the community influences he faced at that moment. He specifically said:

[…more than anything the lack of maturity at that time. Actually the society that surrounded me are the friendships of going out and that's what I dedicated myself more than anything, not so much to the university study. ...All are from the community, most are from childhood, not so many from

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[202] Original in Spanish: "*En realidad si me afectó, me afectó porque sentí tristeza. Yo tenía en mi mente algo planeado y como siempre digo, el mundo da tantas vueltas. Mi esposa me expreso lo que estaba pasando, y mi decisión en ese momento fue que ella siguiera sus estudios y nos resultó muy bien.*"

[203] Original in Spanish: "*Porque a pesar de que tenía una mujer, no era maduro yo lo digo ya arrepentido porque soy cristiano, pero tomé muchas malas decisiones…*"

school. Because from the moment one leaves school, you separate from the school and stay with the community. Not many at the time that I was in the university were in the university and those who had their path, they went their path and they left the going-out group and those if they followed their path, so everyone chooses their destiny. Each one, if he is in his own, moves away.][204] (NARR01, a male cameraman, personal communication, April 23, 2017)

This interviewee also spoke about his lack of maturity and also on the kind of company that surrounded him during his university days, which influenced him to drop out. In agreement with what Rios & Pineda (2014) and Romo & Fresan (2001) state about the maturity level of the freshman student, this former dropout emphasized and corroborates the lack of maturity a young person has at this time of his life. He also explained that during high school, peers who also attend school are the ones that really have influence, the ones that belong to his community.

7.1.2. Achievements and satisfaction in life

Former dropouts and community members spoke about obtaining a balance in their lives thanks to becoming more mature, of having a feeling of satisfaction in life while learning responsibility (as a parent), of acquiring new abilities to develop, of developing spiritual leadership, and of gaining life experiences for personal growth.

There was a marked tendency to mention job-related achievements (hierarchical position), material acquisitions (properties and/or business ownership) and spiritual achievements (church/God-related), as important in life. It is interesting to note that 30% of the former dropout interviewees said that apart from their job or career-related achievements, they did not have any other achievement worth mentioning. During the former dropout interviews, phrases illustrating the feeling of pride and regret

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[204] Original in Spanish: "*…más que todo la falta de madurez en ese tiempo. En realidad, la sociedad que me ha rodeado son las amistades de salidas y a eso me dedicaba más que todo, no tanto al estudio universitario. …Todos son de la comunidad, la mayoría son de infancia, no tanto de la escuela. Porque uno desde el momento que sale de escuela, se separa de la escuela y queda con los de la comunidad. No muchos en el tiempo que yo estuve en la Universidad estaban en la Universidad y los que tuvieron su camino, ellos siguieron su camino y se apartaron del grupo de la salidera y esos si siguieron su camino, entonces cada quien escoge su destino; cada quien si esta en lo suyo se aparta.*"

simultaneously were common, such as, "I have everything that I wanted without a diploma, but if I had just graduated from university, things would have been better."

An interviewee (NARR01, male cameraman, personal communication, April 25, 2017) said that for five years, he had been working as a freelancer in the media production industry which made him feel very proud of his accomplishments. However, he always had the idea of going back to his studies in order to access more growth opportunities. Nonetheless, he confessed that he has no time for continuing his studies and that he really does not want to. But only if there was an opportunity of a specific course related to his current job, he would think about it. Overall, he says that he feels satisfied with his life. For this former dropout, his personal achievement, in this case his job, is not really attached to any academic achievement, and it seems that it is not important anymore.

Regarding parenthood, those who are parents among the former dropout interviewees conveyed a high level of satisfaction because of being able to provide their children with a good education. The first one commented on this: [My satisfaction is partly because I got the house, but the most important thing for me is to be helping my son in his studies. And well I have continued working, I have not stopped because of that] (DO15, male industrial mechanic, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[205] For some parents, this is an example counted as one of their highest achievements that wouldn't have happened if they had continued their studies at university.

Regarding the topic of personal development related to satisfaction in life, in focus group discussion #1, achievement was completely connected to getting to know God. One of the participants attested the change she experienced on how now she sees things in life as an opportunity:

> [So when Christ rescues me, God comes to my heart, automatically I see how the reason of life as you say, I see things differently, I see the opportunity that God has for me of so many things and to know so many people and that that has been a great blessing to me. Having God in the first place and

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[205] Original in Spanish: *"la satisfacción mía es en parte porque conseguí la casa, pero lo más importante para mí es estar ayudando a mi hijo en sus estudios. Y bueno he seguido trabajando, no me he detenido por eso."*

in my heart, is the best] (FG1, personal communication, April 27, 2017).[206]

Family values also came out to the fore regarding achievements and satisfaction. All the participants of focus group #1 admitted that family, values and education were among the most important things in life for them. They connected all three points into one good argument, where they stated that teaching spiritual values (by reading and following the Bible) to the emerging generations will strengthen families; therefore, it is the only way to help families succeed. They continued to explain:

> [It's that the manual for excellence for life, to fulfill the purpose in this life, the manual for excellence is the Bible, the word of God. Yes, God is not hard to achieve. That is, put God first in everything; may he be our partner, our friend, our father, our instructor, our pastor. The Bible says: Jehovah is my shepherd and nothing will be lacking. When it says nothing, it includes everything, everything, and everything. The secular, the spiritual, the material, everything is based on the word of the Lord] (FG1, personal communication, April 27, 2017).[207]

Another former dropout attested to the previous topic in focus group discussion #1 as follows:

> [When I left the university, another stage began. A stage of a life of vanity began, because I was earning good money in that company. Even when I know Jesus Christ in 2007, when I then returned to studies but in another area, now in the area of theology. And I started studying at the International Bible Institute to get a Pastorate. That is already, and my academic focus went to what is the part of the Bible itself. And that's

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[206]   Original in Spanish: *"Entonces cuando Cristo me rescata, Dios llega a mi corazón, automáticamente yo veo cómo se dice el porqué de la vida, eh veo las cosas de otra manera, veo la oportunidad que Dios tiene para mí de tantas cosas y de conocer tantas personas y que eso ha sido de gran bendición para mí. Tener a Dios en primer lugar y en mi corazón, es lo mejor."*

[207] Original in Spanish: *"Es que el manual por excelencia para la vida, para cumplir el propósito en esta vida, el manual por excelencia es la Biblia, la palabra de Dios. S,i no está Dios difícilmente se puede lograr. O sea, poner primero a Dios en todo; que él sea nuestro socio, nuestro amigo, nuestro padre, nuestro instructor, nuestro pastor. Dice la Biblia: Jehová es mi pastor y nada me faltará. Cuando dice nada, incluye todo, todo, todo. Lo secular, lo espiritual, lo material todo está basado en la palabra del Señor."*

where I changed, now I have another horizon] (DO02, married male merchant, personal communication, June 21, 2016).[208]

In this particular case, the former dropout pointed out that although he dropped out from university, the interest for studying was still latent. Therefore, he started other type of studies that also helped him as a professional, as a pastor. These two examples belong to people that profess the Christian evangelical faith. Therefore, their values and personal interests are guided by religious values and the teachings of the Bible; and they find satisfaction and fulfilment in it. Besides, in the last example, studies were also part of the achievement but not necessarily university studies linked to a job position.

But spiritual goals and achievements are not exclusive to those who profess Christian evangelical beliefs. A Catholic former dropout also commented, [My personal goals were fulfilled. I have my house, my family, I got married; so for personal goals...well, I just need to get married by the church] (DO12, married cameraman, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[209]

Another former dropout highlighted the fact of how well-regarded having an academic title is. He shared his wife's accomplishments and counted the constitution of his family as belonging to his personal achievements. He specifically said, [Outside of work, I have my baby and I've married a professional; she has studied!] (DO12, married cameraman, personal communication, June 23, 2016).[210] In his words I can relate to the importance of building a family of his own and even having his wife finish her studies as an opportunity to show off and share how satisfied he feels with her accomplishments.

Among all interviewees in this research, I found examples of happiness and fulfillment in people who could help their children succeed in their studies instead of themselves, people that may have suffered scarcity of economic resources but still have succeeded in finding a stable job. There have also

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[208] Original in Spanish: "*Cuando salí de la Universidad, comenzó otra etapa. Comenzó una etapa de una vida de vanidad, porque yo ganaba buen dinero en esa compañía. Hasta cuando conozco de Jesucristo en el año 2007, cuando entonces retomo los estudios pero en otra área, ahora en el área de la Teología. Y empecé a estudiar en el Instituto Bíblico Internacional para sacar un Pastorado. O sea ya, ya mi enfoque académico pasó a lo que es la parte de la Biblia en sí. Y ahí fue donde yo cambié, ahora sí tengo otro horizonte.* "

[209] Original in Spanish: "*Mis metas personales si las cumplí. Tengo mi casa, mi familia, me casé; así que por las metas personales… bueno nada más me falta casarme por la iglesia.*"

[210] Original in Spanish*: "Fuera de lo laboral, tengo mi bebé y me he casado con una profesional; que ella si ha estudiado!"*

been many examples of people that value what they have in a very positive way in line with the standards of their family, community or society. These people found facets of their lives that contributed to the achievement of their goals and aspirations; and thus, their personal development.

7.1.3. The need of university studies versus success in life

With regard to the importance of studying at university, the 50 dropout interviewees were asked if they believed that studying was something every person needs. Forty-eight percent believed that there is a need to go to university to become someone in life, while 32% disagreed, 16% had opinions on both sides and 4% did not have an answer. Similarly, two of the three dropout interviewees (narrative) stated that there is a need to attend university with an aim of prospering in life as they regretted having dropped out. The other interviewee claimed that after clearly setting out her goals in life, university studies were not necessary. This last statement is consistent to what Quaglia & Cobb (1996) say - that aspirations are goals set to oneself that add a sense of purpose and impulse to progress in the direction of that goal.

Among the group of former dropout interviewees, there was a general sentiment on the need for university studies since attending university not only gives one the opportunity to learn specific information for a task, career or profession, but it also provides a whole series of integral tools with which a person can face life situations. These tools include social and communicative skills, leadership competences, and management and organizational abilities. They also challenge a person to make plans for e.g. starting their own business while dealing with a competitive environment. This means that the person who attends university is on track with the new trends of society, while not being educated is like being isolated from human development (Astin, 1993).

On this particular idea, a former dropout spoke about her experience:

> [Well, monetarily I have grown a lot in a job without a degree. In other words, without the degree despite a university degree, but the experiences I had have helped me a lot in that part and I have been able to get material things like anyone; a car, a house and many other things. I traveled and visited many places. If I had not been in that job I would not have not seen

and learned what I know now] (DO09, single female marketing assistant, personal communication, June 22, 2016).[211]

This marketing assistant grants her success to a job opportunity and clarifies that her achievements were accomplished without a university degree. Therefore, her motivation for success was not "certificate oriented" as asserted by Van Bragt, et al. (2011) on Vermunt (1992). In contrast, focus group discussion #2 referred to the case of those who attend university solely because it is the next step after high school but without having clear objectives on what they will do with the chosen degree. Also, participants mentioned not needing a degree to become an entrepreneur with a lot of offers and opportunities. The participants of this focus group discussion agreed with the fact that learning a profession without getting a degree, is better than having wasted their time studying something that they do not need a diploma or four years at university for at their current job.

On this matter, one of the narrative interviewees, commented on his frustrations because of the difficulties he had in his new career. For example, he struggled with being fixed to a standard salary without any promotion possibilities because of not having a diploma. Later on, he was offered several related jobs in which he could empirically learn[212] new skills applied to his job and get better positions due to the lack of professionals in the field.[213] In his case he claims this was just a matter of luck. He affirms that in either case, whether you study or whether you learn a profession empirically, you can still succeed in life:

> [No knowledge is bad, but there are people who have succeeded without studies. But from what I see, if you have the desire to study and the opportunity, great! ...Necessary, not in all cases. You can be, as you say, self-taught or you learn on your own] (NARR01, male cameraman, personal communication, April 23, 2107).[214]

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[211] Original in Spanish: *"Bueno, la verdad monetariamente he crecido mucho en un trabajo sin título. O sea sin el título que pesa que es universitario, pero las experiencias que tengo me han ayudado mucho en esa parte y he podido conseguir cosas materiales como cualquier persona que quiere un carro, una casa que quiere muchas otras cosas, pues entonces…pero viajé y conocí mucho, que si no hubiese estado en ese trabajo no lo hubiese no hubiese conocido y aprendido lo que sé."*

[212] To learn empirically is a way of gaining knowledge by means of direct and indirect observation or experience.

[213] TV production.

[214] Original in Spanish: *"Ningún conocimiento es malo, pero hay personas que han salido adelante sin estudios, pero por lo que veo si tú tienes las ganas de estudiar y la oportunidad,*

This opinion on experience matches what Matosa & Silveira (2003) believe is needed to succeed and perpetuate time in the labor market. He also stresses the fact that the Panamanian labor market is "credential oriented" (Husen, 1985) as students that attend university are strongly motivated by the rewards of getting a job (Van Bragt, et al., 2001 on Vermunt, 1992) and not so much for the sake of academic or personal development. One former dropout also agrees with this idea and commented about how university is seen depending on life priorities:

> [...the studies are in a secondary role when you have to feed the family, you have responsibilities and more if you are not at a suitable age of study, but already at an age of rent, house, car, debts. That becomes a priority. A lot of people do not forget how important studies are, how they incorporate it into their professional improvement, but most people do not see it that way. Then studies can become a personal obstacle] (DO026, male IT specialist, personal communication, June 27, 2016).[215]

In his analysis, and as a man, there is a strong view of life circumstances in contrast with life priorities. According to Smith (2004) and Francis (2000), the performing role of a male student can be easily influenced by the responsibilities a man is supposed to have when he has a family. Thus, it is not a matter of education not being important but a matter of what they take into account and priorities (Blumer, 1986).

Another interviewee (NARR02, single female entrepreneur, personal communication, April 23, 2017), commented that after dropping out, her life turned around and she was able to travel and learn new languages, through a new job that was not related to what she studied before. With this idea, she asserted that although a degree helps you to grow in the labor market and is important, it is not a must: [It is important because yes it helps you open doors, but it is not necessary for your personal or professional growth, because I have come very far without a university

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¡Magnifico!…Necesario, no en todos los casos. Puedes ser, como se dice autodidacta o se aprende solo."

[215] Original in Spanish: *"…los estudios quedan en un papel secundario cuando tienes que alimentar a la familia, tienes responsabilidades y más si tú no estás en una edad propicia de estudio, sino ya a una edad de alquiler, casa, carro, deudas. Eso se vuelve prioritario. Muchos no olvidan, no olvidan lo importante que es el estudio, como te acompañan en tu superación profesional, pero este la mayoría no lo ven así. Entonces al estudio se le puede tornar como un obstáculo personal."*

degree] (NARR02, single female entrepreneur, personal communication, April 23, 2017).[216]

This female entrepreneur, in agreement with Ahn & Baek (2012), acknowledges the importance university education has towards the gain of access to a greater socio-economic level. Her experience is not the most common one, but she certainly points out the particular case of succeeding in life after having dropped out as stated by Schnepf (2015). This author stresses the idea of the advantages a person who has dropped out has after leaving university as related to opportunities of career advancement. The interviewee admitted that although getting a diploma may be important for others, she decided to only take courses as a strategy to fulfill knowledge gaps that she had. In this way, she ensures that income differences between a person with or without a diploma exist in the labor market. She also highlighted the importance of taking opportunities in life and capitalizing on any contacts that you may get along the way.

This female entrepreneur also stated that she always thought about going back to university and that she admired all those classmates that finished their programs, but she does not regret having dropped out at all as every person has a different set of aspirations and life priorities (Savig & Schwartz, 2000). At this point, she compared her life and several job opportunities that she had without sacrificing too much. She compared her plans and choices to the possible choices she could have taken while continuing her university studies and career path (Sherwood, 1989). She also confessed that she derived her satisfaction from having traveled around the world, learning new cultures and getting to know a lot of people and also highlighted that attending the university may not be for everyone. Some people may only need a kind of orientation and possibly participation in various courses in order to succeed.

She also stated that it is important to understand that university studies are most of the time taken in order to satisfy others (Savig & Schwartz, 2000) and also that any person can be self-taught, and referred to famous geniuses that made it without going to university. She added: [After all, a degree opens doors, but it does not guarantee a position] (NARR02, single female entrepreneur, personal communication, April 25, 2017).[217]

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[216] Original in Spanish:*"Es importante porque si te ayuda a abrir puertas, pero no es necesario para tu crecimiento personal o profesional, porque he llegado muy lejos sin un título universitario."*
[217] Original in Spanish: *"Después de todo, un título abre puertas pero no te garantiza un trabajo estable"*

Another interesting perspective regarding the common sequence in a student's life is that a person ideally studies first and later gets a job or gets a better job. But, in the minds of some of these interviewed Panamanians it was the other way around. They claimed that a person should study to help himself not to get fired; which means that they see other co-workers as competitors. This finding supports the literature provided by Husen (1985) on the motivation provided by competition in the labor market, which is mostly certificate-oriented. During former dropout interviews, it was also reported that some people who went to university to study a certain subject ended up working in something very different. In this manner, it supports the idea of the need to have university studies, even for entrepreneurship purposes.

On university studies, this same narrative interviewee, a single female entrepreneur, said that most university programs take so many years of sitting in a classroom, while others are learning to do the job. Also, she states that information is too broad and that the student does not focus on what they really want to learn for a living. She also emphasized the idea of people not knowing what they want and not having goals in life; that is, on people who are merely followers. Some want better belongings (material goods), while others want merit and success, and still others only want to work selflessly. The idea of having goals is not taught in schools and most students do not think outside of the box; and this is what you need to succeed according to her.

On the other hand, those who work for big companies (or work for others), need to present a diploma as a requisite, but it does not mean that they have the required knowledge. In this sense, the diploma gives the student an entry to the job, but does not guarantee they stay in the job.

According to Husen (1985), students are motivated towards how high they can get with the pursued degree. Therefore, students become job-seekers and not skilled people, in my opinion. University students will follow subjects semester by semester but there is not a real focus or plan of what they aspire to be in the future. And, in a certain way, they conform to working for others. Of course, there are also those who, although they could not achieve a diploma, have targeted courses and other resources for the achievement of their goals.

A third interviewee admitted that although he dropped out from university, life struggles helped him to succeed only with high school studies. And he does not regret this. However, he feels that his parents denied him an opportunity by not supporting him to continue at university. For this reason,

he confesses that the situation gives him a feeling of annoyance and sadness (NARR03, single male welder and singer, personal communication April 23, 2017). This particular case is consistent to Cabrera, et al. (1992) on factors that influence the dropout decision. According to Haybron (2011) the state after succeeding in life will reveal the state of well-being of the person. This interviewee expressed how his own accomplishments, not having been procured by anyone but himself, made him feel satisfied with his present life.

Concerning future plans, 48% of the dropout participants confirmed that they plan to continue their university studies, 26% would like to establish their own business or start as entrepreneurs, 18% mentioned plans involving new jobs, traveling or learning other languages, 6% have plans related to church activities and 2% said they had no plans at all.

To conclude, Prof. Mendez (personal communication, April 12, 2017), explains that regarding human development, there is an association between any important economic boom and the university registration demand. Mendez alleges that whenever there is an economic crisis in the country, more students register. This shows that the fewer crises there are, the greater the labor supply and therefore fewer students come to study. Thus, students see their studies as an advantage to their personal development.

7.1.4. Generational influence

According to their own observations, participants of focus group discussion #2 that they noticed a difference between the current generations at university and the previous ones. They claimed that they have observed that previous generations tended to drop out from university more than the students of nowadays. They mentioned that nowadays there is a greater incidence of new short programs and private universities that provide ease of access, flexibility and opportunities for studying online and weekend classes, as well as of providing financing and partial scholarships. And, although for private universities it is a matter of business, the chances are higher that the student will graduate and earn the desired diploma. Besides, some of the participants in this group believe that long programs in public universities are a waste of time and that university courses by themselves will never give you all the knowledge required to perform as a professional, the same remarks previously made by NARR02.

Previous studies (Husen, 1985; Vermunt, 1992; Schalock et al., 2016), concur on the current competitiveness and credential- oriented students' motivation. Plus, there is an increment of international universities with international perspectives in the labor market that offer innovative learning methods in less time than the public ones. Thus, the accomplishment of a diploma becomes more achievable.

The discussion about differences on generations brought an interesting comparison. It was pointed out that previous generations were strongly motivated by their parents and relatives in general to study as it was the only way of succeeding in life, but there were fewer opportunities or choices. On the other hand, newer generations lack motivation to study. And although they have a plethora of choices to choose from, finances and new trends are against them. This idea agrees with what Twenge, Campbell & Freeman (2012) state about generations that adapt to the sociocultural backgrounds of their own time. That is, as culture changes over time, people choose to conform or not to society. As values change, practices and behavior will also change.

On entrepreneurship, one interviewee, a male welder and singer (NARR3, single male welder and singer, personal communication, April 23, 2017) admits that he has got to know several persons from his generation (X) who empirically learned an occupation or only took some courses and now have small companies of their own. He claims that this is because their focus on progressing in the labor market.

8. CHAPTER

This chapter will discuss the overall conclusions of the study including the factors identified that influence dropout and its consequences in life. Furthermore, I will recommend future research that may be related to this study.

8.1. Conclusion

Conclusions presented in this chapter broaden on the theoretical discussions presented in Chapters 5 through 7. The conclusions take on the study's main findings in relation to each of the three research sub-questions. This study had three main purposes. The first was to examine the general factors that influence students to drop out from university based on the experience and observation of the study participants. The second purpose was to analyze the influence and connection that socio-cultural practices in the community can have with the dropout phenomenon. And third, explore the personal development reached by those who have dropped out.

Studies about university dropouts around the world and its contributing factors have been carried out in multiple educational and social settings other than the Panamanian context. However, the information about these factors gathered at national level in Panama is scarce and incomplete.

Daily influences were particularly disclosed by participant responses under the category of dropout factors. Information in relation to their perceptions about this influence is validated with previous observations. For example, the general observation reported by most of the participants was that they dropped out from university because of their family's financial status or lack of financial support. This idea matches with the results of a number of Panamanian studies such as Jovane (1995), Calderon (2005), Escobar et al. (2005), Palacios (2008), and Garrido et al. (2012).

Apart from the financial factor, institutional issues were also raised with an emphasis on the lack of orientation they get from universities before university registration. On the other hand, family situations were pointed out as determinants at the time of establishing life priorities when making the decision to drop out. With the same importance, distances and transportation issues were also related to personal security issues as well

as the existing contrast of living in a growing city were the urban distribution and access to university do not go hand in hand.

Among other factors, institutional involvement in higher education was criticized in the sense of the marketing focus that private universities have towards prospective students and the lack of social and academic preparedness students have for university life. One interesting critique is how the media plays important roles promoting or preventing university dropout as it can be used as part of a marketing strategy that favors private universities or promotes education and values in general. On another point, the mass media was also associated to constant bombardment to increase product and service consumption that students face every day, with the difficulty of often not having their own money to spend. That is, the students need to get a job to be able to consume, and therefore they drop out from their studies. This same analysis relates to relationships in which the male is the one that pays for the consumption of the couple.

Although the generational factor did not show predominantly in the interviewees' opinions, some participants compared themselves to other generations and made their remarks on maturity, persistence, social interaction and conformity. At last, conformism, which is used with a different connotation in the Panamanian context, was also referred to as a negative behavior of being content with what has been achieved, although what was achieved was not the goal at the beginning. It was related to having low expectations or no aspirations at all.

During the study there were several community practices depicted by the interviewees as practices being tied to the dropout phenomenon. These practices were referred to as socio-cultural practices as they were performed in the family circle or as a common practice within the community. The following conclusions unfolded:

Crime and drugs: Crime and drugs were not connected to their illegality but rather as a daily practice within the community with the resignation of its inhabitants. Former dropouts and community members agreed that to a certain point, drug consumption is considered in some communities as a way of socialization and strengthening bonds using psychological bullying as an instrument and drug dealing. This combination is often seen as an adopted behavior of those who have failed in life and try to encourage others to enter into criminality in order to cope with the rules of the street, which are never connected to education.

These practices have also consequences in other neighbors who are affected by isolation, as they try to isolate themselves and their families in order to be protected from the community influences. Isolation leads to lack of socialization and consequently can also be another factor associated with dropping out from university because of low self-esteem and personality issues. An interesting aspect of those people who practice isolation is that they mostly come from poor or conflictive communities where everybody, even those that have joined gangs, are victims because of the lack of safety.

Lack of values: There was a strong opinion among participants on the lack of values among Panamanians in general, as a strong influence on the decision of dropping out. The incidence of repetitive speeches from parents, relatives and acquaintances on how important it is to push oneself to get to the graduation day was also exposed. In this particular situation, graduating from high school or earning a degree is not viewed as an investment for future economic success (Human Capital theory)[218,] but as personal satisfaction, which I relate to personal development.

Contrastingly, there is no real emotional support and/or financial provision to continue studying, the emotional support being the scarcest. The graduation day or diploma is often conceived as a gift for the parents, as an achievement of what they couldn't fulfil. This is a very common idea for those studying in high school which has been passed on through generations and also applies to higher education.

Although interviewees repeat the word "values," they do not really specify which values they refer to. After rereading all interview transcripts, I can deduce that some of them talk about family values and others refer to personal values or even moral values. It is important to point out that as for the topic of values, there is a recent subject assigned to elementary school curricula called values, as a first step into promoting and strengthening good behavior amongst children attending school.

On another note, it was also mentioned that there is a lack of respect from the ones who live in the same house or by the neighbors for those who want to study, not being careful of distracting others that are studying, including the ones that still attend school. This particular issue occurs more frequently during weekdays and in poor neighborhoods where there is a lot of unemployment and a lot of spare time or there is a strong incidence of

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[218] Human capital is productive wealth embodied in labor, skills and knowledge. OECD, 2001.

drugs and crime. On the other hand, in neighborhoods where most work during the week, this issue is more likely to take place during the weekends.

Party culture: It is understood that for some dropouts, a life of partying was of utmost importance at that moment in their lives. They were more oriented to satisfying their carnal needs than anything else by always associating friendly meetings with drinking, dancing and partying. The term "party culture" has also been associated with decreased college attendance, criminal activities (Lindo, Siminski & Swensen, 2018) and excessive drinking.

One group of respondents living in the same neighborhood tried university for one or two semesters and dropped out because of lack of commitment. This group was compared to other generations from the same neighborhood that did not experience this partying issue. This may have happened because of a change in the media's target[219] at that time which was directed to a specific age range or maybe because of the evolution of social generations.[220]

There was another group of young people that, because of the strong influence of the media having targeted them for different kinds of activities not related to university (concerts, disco parties, etc.), dropped out from university. This particular group was composed only of the students that attended university during the morning and afternoon shift. In this sense, we can say that this party issue can be connected to the lack of values of these young people since they clearly settled for what was more important to them at that particular moment in their life.

Dropping out from studies at any level of education has its consequences. Yet, dropping out from university has direct consequences on the future personal development of an individual as a valuable and productive adult in society. I was also able to identify some positive and negative consequences on the former dropout interviewees' personal development:

The need of attending university: As expressed by participants in this study, attending university could be an available resource for almost every student attempting to pursue a career. But, for the many reasons presented here, some of these students may be unable to make it. University education is commonly seen as the preferred education path for those who finish high school and see themselves climbing within the labor market.

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[219] In this case I refer to the radio.

[220] "… as a way of understanding differences between age groups as a means to locating individuals within historical time" Pilcher (1994).

Contrastingly, former dropouts in this study also acknowledged that there is no need to attend university to make progress and that there is a relatively large range of possibilities and opportunities within the educational system in order to help a person succeed in life.

For some of these people, there are other priorities in life than studying or holding a degree and often the knowledge needed to perform a job may require more hands-on experience rather than only taking classes. On the other hand, those who strive to move upwards in the labor market and maintain a particular living standard get frustrated because they do not have any degree to support their job position. In this sense, it may be the case that it is not a matter of having to drop out but a matter of failing to identify personal priorities in life.

Achievement and satisfaction: According to what these dropouts experienced, the high school education system in Panama lacks focused orientation towards the future. They claimed that as young students they were immature and, with little sense of responsibility, they had undefined priorities in life or even immediate goals.

On a very interesting note, several participants referred to the way some Panamanians feel satisfied with achievements which have been accomplished by making the least effort. They described this attitude as conformism. This is a cultural practice in which some people grow up without setting goals for themselves; therefore, achievement is reached based on very low expectations. For these reasons, conformism was referred to as a cultural issue of part of the population. This attitude is not restricted to a particular location or community. It was described by the dropouts as a learned attitude of those who were raised without giving value to opportunities in life and not making an effort to seize them.

Most of the participants expressed that they found a great feeling of satisfaction when they finally got to start a family and also when they were able to financially support them. According to former dropouts in this study, family building and support is a priority in their lives and much more important than studying. And, although these people dropped out from university, they clarified that they consider having time to support their children at school after dropping out of university as a great matter of satisfaction. This aspect was particularly mentioned by housewives that believe that dropping out gave them the opportunity to do so.

However, there was a group of people to which life experiences and spirituality was their priority. This was seen as a matter of personal growth

where their relation with God was above any other achievement or satisfaction. The spiritual communities adopted the spiritual leadership as a cultural practice and alleged that if it was not for dropping out, they would not have had the opportunity of getting to know God and develop themselves in this spiritual way.

New opportunities and overcoming actions: Dropping out from university may be seen as a failure or an obstacle for success in life. However, it can also be a trigger factor towards any person's development. Several dropout interviewees admitted that after dropping out from university and being denigrated by society, they were exposed to an involuntary turn in their lives. After failed attempts in the labor market, they experienced opening their minds to new opportunities including empirically learning a new job not related to what they were previously studying, traveling and focusing on learning other languages, making new contacts throughout the journey and spiritually developing. This success not only includes owning a business and acquiring material assets but also having the acceptance of their community and society in general as a successful person and not a failure as related to dropping out.

Dropout interviewees agreed that family and education were key points for Panamanians, and that these are both important aspects to take into consideration in order to overcome the dropout phenomenon. They suggested that these two concepts should be interconnected with teaching values in order to strengthen what the population lacks. Education is believed to be an important contribution to any country's economic growth. Moreover, it has been included in the Sustainable Development Goals[221] (SDGs) as SDG4. Panama has started with its first steps on enhancing education in schools, but higher education also needs to be incorporated in these development plans.

There is a strong need for institutional reform in the Panamanian higher education system including addressing first contact with prospective students and the reevaluation of higher education approaches, standards, and policies. At the same time, it is of utmost importance to evaluate the dropout phenomenon as an integral part of emerging modern social and cultural trends within the needs of the whole population and specifically at community level.

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[221] According to UNDP, the Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

There is also a need for new approaches at the forefront of modernity. Universities in Panama and the government should be able to offer appropriate alternatives for the improvement of educational quality that clarify educational goals to all prospective students and therefore counteract the dropout incidence according to individual student histories. Every student carries their own history which has been influenced by family, community and society in general; and the consequences of these influences will return to them as a continuous cycle.

Consequently, it is not only the academic potential that a student has that leads to a successful or unsuccessful personal development, but the outcomes bound to the performance of socio-cultural practices among which this student has been raised that may also be repeated across generations. This idea agrees with Braxton et al. (1997) who claims that the causes and solutions to the university dropout phenomenon will be finally unfolded by combining the psychological, the sociological and the organizational dimensions of the problem.

There is an absence of programs that integrate the education system with societal goals and its community culture. In order to do so, there is a need to identify factors that contribute to dropouts which are different from financial and institutional studies or only with what statistics show. This would enable one to implement prevention measures with academic and psychological support programs that monitor students at risk of dropping out. There is a need for involvement and further intervention with new strategies so that we can also learn from people and their communities. In this way, there will be a compass to promote a sustained and meaningful development of Panamanian citizens.

Findings in this study also showed that there are still traces of the colonial power system applied to the social and cultural understanding of our society. The persistent discriminatory system of classes and gender discrimination still exist and are embedded in the people. It is reflected in the economic, social and cultural system imposing values and expectations on classes and genders.

I hope that in the near the future there will be up-to-date quantitative studies on university dropout as it is a predominant issue in the Panamanian higher education system and it affects the country's development. However, apart from statistics, there will always be the need for exploring the socio-cultural dimension of the phenomenon and the identification of

key factors attached to it in order to bring about a better understanding of its many dimensions.

In this sense, in order to advance with any achievements on the matter, new research must produce data going beyond statistics with a focus on the cultural context of the student in contrast with the present society to suggest interventions that not only focus on the institutional and academic aspects involved in the problem but also the personal aspects with regard to the student.

8.2. Contribution and recommendations

The findings of this study will be helpful for policy makers in their attempts to control dropout rates in Panamanian higher education institutions. These findings will also be useful to help understand some of the many reasons why Panamanian university students drop out from their studies.

If a university student drops out after studying for only a few semesters, there will be a definite waste of resources from their family, the university and the society they belong to; especially in a country where resources are limited. A university student's dropout is a waste of institutional resources that should demand greater attention. Therefore, this research could contribute to the development of a general sample of information that can help visualize the actual situation to be faced by prospective pre-university and university students by documenting external influences that affect them on a daily basis.

Besides, while new innovative policies are developed towards combating the dropout phenomenon, orientation approaches may take into account the importance of helping young students in high school to define what they really want for the future and their possibilities of accomplishment.

This research makes an attempt to provide detailed information so that the government can take action in the implementation of new educational and motivational achievement and lifelong development strategies to improve our new generations. Therefore, I recommend the following actions:

- **Future research**: Perform further research for a better identification of the aspirations, values and concerns of prospective university students in order to help them find their path in life and customize programs that meet their needs.

- **Availability of data**: It would be of great significance to those who will continue studying the higher education dropout phenomenon in Panama to find available data for their studies. These data may include not only statistics on the dates or semesters in which the students dropped out but also the reasons and circumstances why they dropped out and any other relevant information on their future plans.

- **Support programs**: After trying to establish the possible causes of higher education dropouts, bring together special support for prospective university students by structuring a special office for vocational guidance and psychological services, spiritual services, academic tutoring and financial aid.[222]

- **Participation**: creation of promotion campaigns for career orientation which involve government, politics, the higher education sector and the media in order to improve the prospective student's decision making before registering at university. These promotions could be directed to communities in different ways taking into consideration their locals with their particular competences and cultural practices.

The appreciation given to the dropout phenomenon described in this study could also be applied to most social science research topics on student attrition. Nevertheless, research and studies on socio-cultural practices and other matters regarding the dropout phenomenon affecting the Panamanian higher education system are still at an early stage. Therefore, this research will conclude with its presentation of empirical data to university authorities, government representatives, and all interested agencies who can take part in any reform efforts with regard to this phenomenon.

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[222] These services may already exist at universities but only for those who are already registered and not for prospective students.

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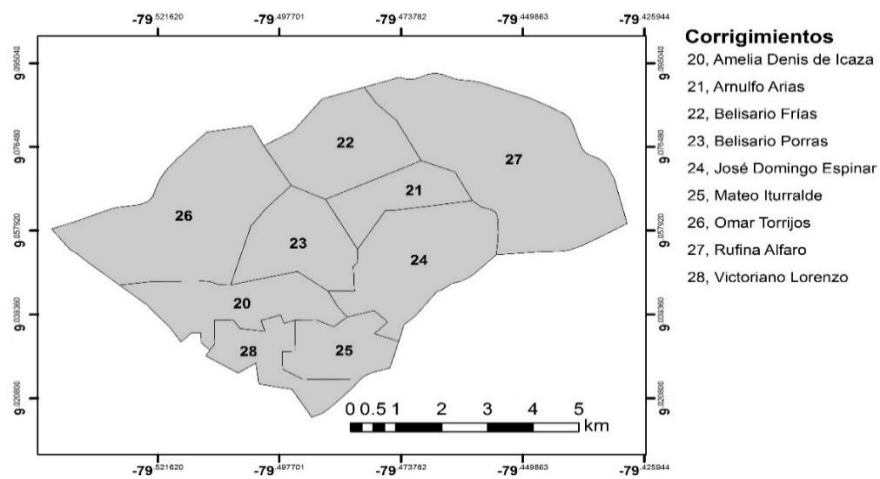
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9. ANNEXES

9.1. Annex 1 - District of Panama and San Miguelito. Distribution of the corregimientos.

Corregimientos

1, Ancón	11, Parque Lefevre
2, Bella Vista	12, Pedregal
3, Betania	13, Pueblo Nuevo
4, Chilibre	14, Río Abajo
5, Curundú	15, San Felipe
6, El Chorrillo	16, San Francisco
7, Juan Díaz	17, San Martín
8, Calidonia	18, Santa Ana
9, Las Cumbres	19, Tocumen
10, Pacora	

Corrigimientos

20, Amelia Denis de Icaza
21, Arnulfo Arias
22, Belisario Frías
23, Belisario Porras
24, José Domingo Espinar
25, Mateo Iturralde
26, Omar Torrijos
27, Rufina Alfaro
28, Victoriano Lorenzo

9.2. Annex 2 – Semi-structured interview guide for former dropouts

Sub-questions	Category	Question in English	Question in Spanish
1. What factors drive students to take the decision of dropping out from university in Panama?	Warm-up. Testing general knowledge of terms	1.Please define dropout. 2.Which university did you attend and which career?	1.Que es desercion para ti? 2.A que universidad asististe y en cual carrera?
	General orientation, institutional orientation	1.Did you ever change careers? ·How many times? 2.Did you ever received any information or counselling previous to choosing your career at university? Explain	1.Cambiaste de carrera? Cuantas veces? 2.Recibiste información previa a la escogencia de la carrera? De parte de quién?
	Dropout reason,	1.Why did you dropped out from university? ·Did you get back any time?	1.Por que razón te saliste de la universidad (Porque desertaste)? Regresaste?
2. What are the socio-cultural practices that contribute to higher education dropout decisions in Panama? a. What practices and who performs these practices?	Practices in the community and their contribution to the dropout decision making	1.Can you please describe what is the common practice regarding studies? (How important is it to study) 2.How people from your community, family and friends see university attrition? ·How did you overcome it? ·Did it affect you?	1.En tu comunidad, cual es la practica comun en cuanto a los estudios? (que tan importante es estudiar) 2.Como es vista la asistencia, inasistencia o deserción de estudios universitaria por tu familia/amigos/comunidad y Como lo enfrentaste? Esto te afecto?

b. Where do they occur? c. How do they occur? d. How do the practices contribute to students' decisions to drop out? e. How do participants describe the contribution of these practices on their dropout decision?		3.Regarding your community, is there any practice, attitude, habit or way of thinking that contributes to students thinking of leaving their studies? ·How? When? Is this your case? 4.Please describe your community. ·Environment,people, education, culture. ·Is living in your community an advantage or a disadvantage for university students? ·Do you participate in any communitary activity? 5.In the case you need support, who gives it to you? ·Community, family, friends 6.At the moment of taking the decision of dropping out, which were your responsibilities? 7.How do you evaluate the difficulty of taking the decision of dropping out? ·Did you ask or discuss it with somebody else? 8.In your opinion, which are the three major causes of university dropouts in Panama?	3.Con respecto a tu comunidad, hay alguna practica, actitud, forma de pensar que contribuya a que los estudiantes universitarios piensen en desertar y posteriormente lo hagan? Como? Donde? Es tu caso? 4.Describe como es el vivir en tu comunidad. (ambiente, gente, escolaridad y cultura; ventaja o desventaja) Participas en alguna actividad? 5.En caso de necesitarlo, de quien recibes apoyo? (comunidad, familia, amistades) 6.Al momento de tomar la decisión de desertar, cuales eran tus responsabilidades? 7.Como evalúas la dificultad al tomar esa decisión? consultaste con alguien mas? 8.En tu opinión, cuales son las tres mayores causas de desercion univeristaria en Panama?
3. How does dropping out affect an individual's personal development?	Testing general knowledge on the term "personal development"	1.Please define the term "personal development". (What do you understand by "personal development"?)	1.Que es desarrollo personal para ti?

		2.What things or aspects are important to obtain it?	2.Que cosas son importantes para obtenerlo?
a. How do university students (that have dropped out) describe their personal development after dropping out? a.1. What are the aspects involved? a.2. What further education if any, do students engage in after dropping out? a.3. What employment, if any, do students engage in after dropping out? b.How was the outcome of dropping out perceived? b.1. By the participant. b.2. By the community / family. b.3. If positive, why is this the case? b.4. If negative, what has the participant done to overcome this?	Dropout outcomes (socialization and emotions)	1.Do you think that dropping out from university caused a change in your personal development or your life development? ·Family, spiritual, employment ·How do you feel about it? 2.How did your family, friends and community perceived or reacted to this situation?	1.Piensas que el haber desertado ocasiono algun cambio en tu desarrollo personal o el desarrollo de tu vida? Familiar, espiritual, laboral? Como te sientes al respecto? 2.Como lo percibieron los demas? Conyuge/familia, amigos, comunidad
	What was done to overcome the outcomes	1. Have you thought about going back to your studies? ·Why? When? Is there any other alternative?	1. Piensas que deberias regresar a tus estudios? Porque? Cuando? Otra alternativa?
	Original plans vs. future plans	1.What were your original professional plans? 2.Do you have any personal or professional plans for the future?	1. Tenías planes profesionales originalmente? 2. Planes personales / profesionales futuros?
	Achievements after dropping out	1.What important achievements have you obtained after dropping out from your university studies?	1. Cuales logros importantes en tu vida has obtenido después de haber desertado de tus estudios universitarios?
	Participant's evaluation of the need of university studies after dropping out	1.Can you please tell if you ever thought that going to university was an obstacle to your goals or dreams? 2.Can you please tell if you could fulfil your goals even without going to university? ·Do you think life would have been different if you	1. En algún momento pensaste que la universidad era un obstáculo para lograr tus sueños 2. Hubieras logrado tus sueños aun sin la universidad? Piensas que las vida hubiera sido diferente sino hubieras desertado? Explica

		hadn't dropped out from your studies?	
		3.Do you think university knowledge is necessary for personal development or to grow as a person? Please explain	3. Piensas que los conocimientos a nivel universitarios son necesarios o facilitan crecer como persona, ser alguien en la vida, etc?
		4.Regarding your children, present and future, would you like them to go to university? Why?	4. En cuanto a tus hijos, presentes y/o futuros, quisieras que fueran a la universidad? Porque?

9.3. Annex 3 – Interview guide for university authorities and staff

CATEGORY	QUESTION
Dropout phenomenon description	1. Can you please give your general impressions on university dropout?
	2. Can you please describe the average dropout student?
	3. Which factors do you consider are determinant to taking the dropout decision? (causes) • When does this process start?
Institutional policies	4. Regarding the university dropout phenomenon, what institutional policies have been developed so far? • Do you consider that these policies or previous policies have any flaws or failures? • If yes, what is the precedent?
	5. Have you observed any dropout (university) tendency in the last 10 – 20 years?
	6. Which institutions should get more involved in the topic with the goal of improving this phenomenon or the system?
Opinion	7. As citizens, how could we contribute to the decrease of the dropout phenomenon?
	8. Conclusions and final recommendations.

9.4.　　　Annex 4 - Ethical consent

Hoja de información de participación y formulario de consentimiento informado

Nombre del proyecto:

1. Mi nombre es Gabisel Barsallo y soy estudiante de doctorado en el Centro de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo (ZEF), Universidad de Bonn, Alemania, en colaboración con Ifarhu y Senacyt. Estoy llevando a cabo un estudio que mira la deserción universitaria en Panamá, las practicas que coadyuvan a tomar la decisión de desertar y las consecuencias en cuanto al desarrollo personal de los participantes.

En el caso de que este formulario de consentimiento contenga palabras difíciles de comprender o no este claro para usted, por favor pregúnteme para explicarle mejor a medida que avanzamos a través de la información.

2. Objetivos del estudio

- El estudio examina las prácticas socio-culturales en el entorno comunitario asociadas con la deserción y definir como la deserción ha influenciado el desarrollo personal del participante.

- El estudio busca contribuir con la literatura local e internacional sobre aspectos determinantes en la toma de decisiones de los estudiantes universitarios de Panamá.

- El estudio tiene como objetivo proveer opiniones sobre cómo pudieron haberse evitado los problemas de deserción, por parte de las instituciones educativas antes del proceso de entrada a la universidad.

3. Tipo de Intervención/Investigación.

Nos gustaría hacerle una serie de preguntas para este estudio. El tipo de información que buscamos Incluye:

- **Encuesta:** que contiene preguntas sobre aspectos demográficos de población como edad, sexo, número de integrantes de la familia, escolaridad, estatus laboral, etc.
- **Entrevista:** que indaga sobre los aspectos de la vida cotidiana del participante y su entorno comunitario que le llevaron a decidir desertar de sus estudios universitarios.
- **Grupo de discusión (taller):** que permite dar un espacio al participante para analizar y discutir sobre su desarrollo personal posterior a la deserción universitaria.

Valoramos su opinión y no hay respuestas incorrectas a las preguntas. Requerimos aproximadamente 15 minutos de su tiempo para completar la encuesta y aproximadamente 1 hora para la entrevista.

4. Beneficios de la participación y valoración

No habrá ningún beneficio directo para usted, pero su participación nos ayudará a saber más acerca de las causas, consecuencias y desarrollo subsecuente a la deserción universitaria. Además, reconoceremos su contribución a este estudio con cierta compensación por uso de su tiempo. No habrá ningún costo monetario para usted.

5. El derecho a denegar o retirar

Su participación en esta investigación es completamente voluntaria. Usted es libre de retirar su consentimiento y dejar de responder preguntas en cualquier momento. Se le dará una oportunidad al final de la entrevista / discusión para revisar sus observaciones, pedir una modificación o eliminar partes de su contribución si no está de acuerdo con mis notas o si no le he entendido bien.

6. Confidencialidad

Este estudio se lleva a cabo de forma anónima. Esto significa que la información dada será de forma anónima y el investigador y asistentes que utilizan los datos nunca serán capaces de identificarlo, excepto con su permiso explícito (véase más adelante). Esto está estrictamente exigidos por la legislación nacional e internacional, y ZEF / Universitaet Bonn no infringirá la ley.

Dado el permiso, el investigador asignara un código/nombre a cada participante. Dicho código estará compuesto de dos letras y un número. Su información será mantenida en un dispositivo de almacenamiento protegido por contraseña que solo el investigador conoce.

8. El uso de los datos obtenidos de sus respuestas

Sus respuestas anónimas solo se utilizaran para fines de investigación. En cualquier publicación científica, los datos serán anónimos.

Usted permite que el investigador, en representación de ZEF, haga una segunda ronda de la encuesta con el fin de generar datos de panel. Usted permite que los miembros el investigador y asistentes utilicen los datos sin forma anónima en el caso de los análisis de datos de panel. No se darán los datos a cualquier otra tercera parte sin que sea de forma anónima.

PERSONA DE CONTACTO:

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta, no dude en hacerla en el momento que lo considere preciso. Si usted considera que ha sido tratado injustamente, o si tiene alguna pregunta o preocupación puede ponerse en contacto con:

Nombre y dirección del investigador / estudiante de doctorado

Gabisel Barsallo, Tel .: +507 838-8680, E-mail: gbarsallo24@hotmail.com

Consentimiento informado:

He leído la declaración anterior y su significado se ha sido explicado por el personal de investigación. Estoy de acuerdo en participar en esta investigación. Entiendo que puedo dejar de participar en este estudio en cualquier momento si así lo decido y hice la investigación del personal / contacto responderá surgieron preguntas durante el curso de la encuesta.

_____**Si, Acepto participar**. Comenzar el proceso de encuesta y entrevista.

_____ **No, no deseo participar**. Discutir esto con el investigador.

Nombre del participante: _____

Firma del participante: _____ Fecha: _____

Firmado por el investigador