

Dropout Rates in Undergraduate Accounting Degree Programmes at a UK University: A 10-Year Longitudinal Study

Abstract

This study provides an analysis of 10 years' worth of dropout data from two undergraduate accounting programmes - Accounting & Finance and Forensic Accounting - at a UK university. The study explores whether dropout rates are consistent for different demographic groups. Data was collected from a population of 6,948 students over a period of 10 years, from 2011 to 2021. The results of this empirical analysis show a consistent pattern as to when and why the students drop out. First, the reason identified for a student dropping out of an accounting degree is mainly due to academic failure. Second, the results show that students usually drop out either early or in the final stages of each academic year, across each level of the degree programmes. Third, the study also identifies significantly higher dropout rates among specific demographic groups, based on gender and ethnicity. Fourth, the results show that there is a difference in dropout rates between the two accounting programmes. This study will help to inform and enable the development of appropriate initiatives to prevent students from dropping out of accounting degree programmes.

Keywords: accounting education; dropout; academic failure; forensic accounting; diversity.

Highlights

- Students from a minority ethnic background have a higher dropout rate, relative to students from a non-minority ethnic background.
- The results suggest that the number of accounting students leaving their degrees is higher at the start and the end of each academic year across each level.
- The student dropout percentage for Forensic Accounting students is higher compared to the traditional accounting degree.
- Recommendations for best practice are that attention should be drawn to students from a minority ethnic background to help them from dropping out.

Dropout Rates in Undergraduate Accounting Degree Programmes at a UK University: A 10-Year Longitudinal Study

1. Introduction

This study empirically examines the reasons why undergraduate accounting students at a UK university leave or drop out, spanning a 10-year period (2011–2021). Data has been collected and analysed from 6,948 students pursuing either an Accounting and Finance degree (AcF) or a Forensic Accounting (FA) degree. There is a variety in terminology which highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of student departure influenced by a range of academic, personal, and institutional factors. Understanding all these nuances as to why students leave their accounting courses is the motivation of this study, as it allows us as researchers to pinpoint when and why students might choose—or be compelled—to abandon their studies. The most popular terms for students abandoning their studies are “leave” and “drop out” and these terms are used interchangeably throughout the education literature (Everaert et al. 2024). Other terms for students leaving include: "student withdrawal," "attrition," "premature termination of participation," (Thalhammer et al., 2022; Aulck et al. 2016; Tight, 2020). Despite a myriad of different names, this study aims to examine all the reasons behind why accounting students have left their courses.

Universities in the UK face distinctive challenges with dropout rates and recruitment in all courses (including accounting), due to their focus on widening participation and support for diverse student populations. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often must balance academic commitments with work and family responsibilities, therefore potentially contributing to higher dropout rates, relative to their peers (Thomas, 2002; Burke & McManus, 2011). Other factors such as financial constraints and varying levels of academic preparedness can further influence persistence, as students in these settings often encounter unique pressures affecting their educational outcomes (Yorke, 2004; Wilcox et al., 2005).

This study contributes to the literature on dropout issues in higher education by exploring the following three factors: first, the reasons, as to why undergraduate students discontinue their studies in an accounting degree programmes at a university in the UK; second, whether there are any differences in dropout rates among various demographic groups based on ethnicity and gender and third, whether there are any variations in dropout rates between a traditional AcF and an FA degree.

Also, it is widely acknowledged that there is a shortage of graduates entering the accounting profession (AICPA, 2023; Gabbing, 2019; Alanezi et al., 2016; Wells, 2015; Jackling et al., 2012).

Therefore, identifying the root causes of attrition at the university level and implementing effective interventions will undoubtedly result in a greater number of graduates pursuing careers in accounting. However, the reasons behind dropouts are not well-documented or well-understood (Hodgen et al., 2023) due to the complexities surrounding dropouts (Kehm et al., 2019).

This study includes all students from the AcF and FA accounting programmes for the period 2011 to 2021, enabling patterns to be identified. The findings of this study are that academic failure is the primary cause of students dropping out. If a student fails a module on their course or starts to do badly, then they can feel the need to drop out and leave their course. The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines academic failure as:

any marked insufficiency or inadequacy in the area of scholarship or study, for example, when a learner does not achieve an expected competence. Contributing factors may include home environment and family, peers, economic context, learning environment and attributes of instruction, and individual characteristics.

According to this study's findings, academic failure can be at any stage of a student's time whilst at university. To determine statistically significant differences in dropout rates among specific groups, t-tests were used to provide empirical results. The results indicate that students from underrepresented ethnic and gender backgrounds face a heightened risk of dropout relative to their white counterparts. Therefore, it is posited that there should be targeted interventions to support students from different backgrounds to help prevent failure and ultimately prevent dropouts.

2. Contributions of this study

Firstly, this study builds on existing theories of student dropout by contextualising them within the academic and professional pathways of accounting. Tinto's theory (1975) emphasised the roles of social and academic integration, personal motivation, and institutional support in predicting student dropout. Building on established Tinto's theories such and his model of academic and social integration, this research highlights how specific factors interact uniquely within accounting programmes to influence students' decisions to persist or depart. Previous literature has suggested that gender and ethnicity play a significant role in students leaving their courses (Maluenda-Albornoz et al.2022; Thomas 2016; Meeuwisse et al., 2010). However more recent studies such as by Everaert (2024) when examining first year accounting student dropout does mention gender but not ethnicity

as reasons for dropping out. Therefore, this study is being conducted to consider if indeed ethnicity or any new variable is a factor associated with students dropping out as it is important to university educators and policymakers to use university resources in the best way possible to support students and prevent dropout.

Secondly, using quantitative data, this study offers insight across gender and ethnic backgrounds as to who drops out and reasons why they do, out of a UK accounting programme. This study analyses the accounting programme further, addressing a gap in the literature, by exploring dropout rates across demographic factors (gender and ethnicity) across two specialisation choices (e.g., AcF vs. FA). This is because Alshurafat et al. (2020) using the traditional theories of experiential learning and signature pedagogies creating a Forensic and Litigation Framework by which they suggest that FA due to its specialised nature may be a more difficult subject for students to master. Therefore, because students find FA difficult to master, they could drop out. However, there is the opposite likelihood that students will not drop out due to increased engagement because students are interested in the subject matter (Winfield and Roberts 2023). We are therefore conducting the analysis to assess whether both degrees have a similar level of dropout. This too should be important to university policymakers so that they can utilize the correct resources to again prevent drop out. For accounting educators, it is important to understand if one degree has a higher dropout than the other. This is important as one course having a higher dropout than the other, should lead to further investigation and debate as to why that is occurring. Corrections can then be made to the curriculum and pedagogy of the accounting degree programmes to prevent future dropout occurring.

Finally, this research has the potential to equip universities with interventions to reduce students' dropout behavior. This contribution is especially timely for institutions in regulated environments, such as the UK, where compliance with retention-focused policies has become essential for funding and institutional standing (Gonclaves et al. 2024). Such interventions may not only assist academic institutions in aligning with regulatory retention standards imposed by bodies like the UK's Office for Students (OFS) but also offer a basis for policies that effectively mitigate attrition within accounting departments (GOV.UK 2019). This study therefore highlights the need for varied support forms within accounting education that cater to diverse student backgrounds and specializations.

The above contributions provide insights about improving retention, inclusivity, and academic success within accounting programmes, and may provide insights and commitment to inclusivity in accounting education. The study proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature, the next section will be hypotheses development, followed by the research design. In the final sections, this

team introduces the results of the analysis, and we also provide a brief discussion of the key problems emerging from the results. These results lead to recommendations and a conclusion.

3. Literature review

Universities are often seen as essential conduits for social mobility, especially for disadvantaged groups; the rising demand for higher education has also intensified financial and social pressures for students and policymakers, particularly in knowledge-based economies (Naseem et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). Within the field of accounting, this demand paradoxically coincides with a global decline in student enrolments, attributed to challenging economic conditions and a range of career alternatives available to prospective students (Dawkins, 2023; Oben & Van Rooyen, 2023; AICPA, 2019). This means therefore that attracting less students to accounting and then having the student dropout is leading to a potential long-term problem in having a reduced total number of accounting students worldwide.

These student dropout problems will affect all institutions, particularly through financial strain, reputational concerns, planning instability (Sánchez-Gelabert & Troiano, 2023; Marschall et al., 2023). Everaert et al. 2024 also mention the mental harm that students can suffer by dropping out due to increased financial pressures, feeling of failure, and family pressure. The effects of high accounting student dropout rates can undermine an institution's ability to sustain enrolments and secure programme funding (Delen, 2012). In the UK, new regulations introduced by the Office for Students (OFS) hold universities accountable for their dropout rates, even levying fines or restricting loan access for inferior performance in retention (Hyndman & Liguori, 2022). This regulatory pressure adds complexity to the dropout landscape, highlighting the financial and reputational stakes associated with dropout in accounting programmes.

3.1 Dropout

Tinto's (1975) theoretical framework on student retention and departure offers a well-established lens for examining dropout. Tinto proposes that students' decisions to stay or leave are due to two main factors: academic integration and social integration within the university environment. According to Tinto, academic integration occurs through formal channels (e.g., course success and faculty support) and social integration occurs through informal social channels (e.g., peer associations). If a student cannot successfully navigate both channels, then the student will potentially dropout of their studies.

Tinto's reasons for dropout have been categorised into four themes, as demonstrated in Figure 1. The first theme, 'Internal,' is concerned about students' thought processes on their ability to achieve academic and social integration at the university. Other researchers have added to this theme by suggesting that a student might consider study conditions at the university (Kehm et al., 2019), and dropout even before they reach university (Bäulke et al., 2022). The second theme, 'Voluntary,' pertains to situations where a student transfers to another university or changes their subject, which is not considered a proper dropout (Kehm et al., 2019; Tinto, 1975) but a more voluntary aspect to leaving (Behr et al., 2020). The third theme, 'Personal' factors, refers to instances where a student decides to leave the university for employment or drops out due to financial constraints or household circumstances. The fourth theme, 'External' factors, highlights that students may drop out due to the possible negative perception they have gained about the course they are studying, such as if the student feels it is relevant to warrant their time and attention or it is a waste of time and therefore are better dropping out.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Tinto's work on student retention and departure since the 1970s has unquestionably achieved paradigmatic success. Tinto (1975) followed Spady's (1970, 1971) model, stating that social and academic integration are the two critical factors for student dropout (see Black, 2024; Towles and Spencer, 1993). Spady found that a student's decision to leave is complex and influenced by various factors, such as family background, integration into the university environment, faculty interaction, peer support, and academic achievement. Both Spady's and Tinto's work emphasize an understanding of how various forms of inequality and disadvantages can create barriers, and often these are overlooked. In this study, Spady's and Tinto's work provides a valuable lens for viewing dropouts in accounting degrees. Amidst an ongoing debate, numerous empirical studies on general university education have been conducted to gain a better understanding of university dropouts. These include research on early warning signals (Everaert et al., 2024), the optional nature of dropout (Bertola, 2023), motivation (Schnettler et al., 2020), reviews by Kehm et al. (2019), and books such as that by Kirp (2019).

Previous research on university dropouts generally has determined that social integration (Ishitani and Flood, 2018) and a sense of belonging to a university (Davis and Taylor, 2019) are essential in preventing dropout. Social integration at university is considered difficult for students from low-

income backgrounds. This is due to these students who often have unclear expectations and lower confidence levels when entering university in comparison to their more privileged peers (Bertola, 2023; Reay et al., 2009; Cahalan and Perna, 2015). Working students face additional challenges as they attempt to balance their studies with demands from their employers (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). First-generation university students are more at risk of dropping out than those with familial experience of university (Kim et al., 2021; Soria and Stebleton, 2012; Chen and Carroll, 2005). Furthermore, financial loan debt and unaffordability that lead to financial stress are often cited as reasons for dropout (Britt et al., 2017; Reay et al., 2009). Students from either low-income or first-generation backgrounds often lack the support networks and resources available to their peers, contributing to their heightened vulnerability to dropout (Cahalan and Perna, 2015).

Stephenson et al. (2020) identify at-risk students and the role of non-cognitive attributes, for example, low self-control, and students exhibiting these traits are less likely to continue with their studies. Further, factors identified are poor performance in mathematics during high school and poor academic performance in a student's first year of university as potential indicators of dropout (for example, Brook and Roberts, 2021; Aulck et al., 2016; Rovira et al., 2017; Thammasiri et al., 2014; Delen, 2012).

Other literature on general university dropouts also shows the impact on dropout due to social and psychological impacts, including feelings of stigma and inadequacy among students who leave their programmes (Lacave et al., 2018). Social anxiety and reduced self-worth contribute not only to students' departure but also to ongoing mental health challenges, potentially disrupting their re-entry into education or the workforce (Ishii et al., 2018; Chemers et al., 2001). To ensure successful student retention, Grabsch et al. (2024) suggest that universities need to target specific communities and individuals. However, Lacave et al. (2018) note that even with interventions, it may sometimes be too late to prevent dropout.

3.2 Dropout in accounting

Dropout within accounting education is a complex interplay of academic, social, personal, and external factors (Kehm et al., 2019). Accounting education on dropout can be categorised themes like Tinto's work of: Internal (academic and social integration), personal motivation, and external factors.

Tinto's Internal theme is the most relevant. If the student is unable to achieve academic integration, then this leads to poor academic performance (failure). Student failure is a significant predictor of

dropout, particularly in the technical field of accounting (Osman et al. 2017). Deficient performance in early accounting courses by students can lead to higher dropout rates, with students in financial accounting (FA) programmes appearing especially at risk due to the specialized knowledge required (Di Gabriele, 2009; Van Akkeren & Tarr, 2022). Tinto's framework suggests that academic success—or lack thereof—shapes students' integration trajectories, reinforcing the need to understand academic failure as an attrition trigger in accounting.

Reasons for this failure have been suggested poor mathematical ability (Yunker et al., 2009), prior academic achievement, inadequate skill sets, unsuitability for the role, as well as other demographic factors (Guney, 2009; Byrne and Flood, 2008; Springer and Borthick, 2007; Gammie et al., 2003; Gracia and Jenkins, 2003; Lane and Porch, 2002, Koh and Koh 1999). Oben and Van Rooyen in 2023 stated that a student's collective ability and skill set in relation to the demands of an accounting course at university is to blame for failure and then drop-out.

Financial pressures on students may disadvantage students who lack pre-existing familiarity or financial flexibility to seek additional support as they will have to work to support their families (Guney, 2009; Keels, 2013). Students could prioritize extracurricular activities as well as work, and that may contribute to dropout rates as they are not spending enough time on their studies (Beatson et al., 2021; Seow and Pang, 2014).

In the theme of personal motivation, low self-efficacy has been identified as a major barrier; students' lack of confidence in mastering rigorous accounting material appears to influence decisions to leave accounting programmes, especially in fields requiring high cognitive load (Roberts et al., 2023; Schoenfeld et al., 2017).

Several studies have explored external factors driving students away from accounting programmes. Key issues include perceptions of the accounting profession, marked by negative views of career prospects and work-life balance (Marriott & Marriott, 2003), as well as the curriculum's high technical demands (Zakaria et al., 2012).

4. Hypothesis Development

Expanding on Tinto's 1975 theory, research by Meeuwisse et al. (2010) highlights that gender dynamics and a student's ethnic background are particularly influential in shaping students' decisions to withdraw from university. Meeuwisse's theory infers it can be expected that if students are not made to feel welcome because they are female or from a different ethnic minority, due to a negative cultural atmosphere at university, they are likely to dropout. Additional studies by Thomas (2016), Thammasiri et al. (2014), and Keels (2013), also identify ethnicity, and gender as critical determinants of dropout, pointing to the compounded pressures faced by students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Maluenda-Albornoz et al., 2022, building off Ryan and Deci's 2017 Self-Determination Theory (SDT) found that female and ethnic minority students dropped out more than their peers as they lacked valuable support mechanisms and peers who they could turn to for help.

These factors of gender and ethnicity as reasons for dropping out continue to be the findings of various empirical and theoretical models, such as the Student Persistence Model (SPM) created by Addison and Williams (2023). Studies that focus on students when they first enter University, notice that students enter university with what Everaert et al. 2024 describe as a "backpack" of factors such as gender and if because of those differences, the student begins to feel inadequate, are not supported, or made to feel welcome, they will potentially drop-out.

Accordingly, due to these consistent factors of gender and ethnic background emanating from these various empirical and theoretical models, this research hypothesizes that accounting students from different gender and ethnic backgrounds will likely drop out more than their white peers. It will also potentially highlight if these factors are no longer valid (Everaert et al., 2024) for example did not examine the variable of ethnicity), or indeed if any other new factors may appear. By exploring this hypothesis, the study seeks to contribute a more nuanced understanding of dropout that extends beyond the scope of Tinto's original model, offering insights essential for informing institutional policies within increasingly multicultural educational landscapes.

H1. Students that are female and come from more diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds are more likely to drop out compared to their male white counterparts.

This study's second hypothesis seeks to investigate whether significant differences exist in dropout rates between students enrolled in AcF programmes, and those in FA programmes. The FA programme was created in response to both industry and academics such as Alshurafat et al. (2020). The author creates a Forensic and Litigation Framework based on theories of experiential learning and signature pedagogies to integrate FA into traditional accounting deliveries, to enhance pedagogic knowledge and extend accounting curriculums. As such, Alshurafat et al.'s research suggests that FA students face unique academic challenges due to the need for specialized knowledge in fraud detection and an understanding of legal procedures, which are integral to FA practice (Di Gabriele, 2009; Van Akkeren & Tarr, 2022). Such demands, which often surpass those encountered in more conventional accounting pathways, could heighten academic strain and lead to higher dropout rates (Ekornes, 2022; Hartl et al., 2022).

In contrast, AcF students typically engage in a more conventional curriculum focused on fundamental financial and managerial accounting principles. A streamlined curriculum may result in a comparatively lower risk of academic overload and thus lower dropout rates (Grant and Baden-Fuller 2018). The authors point out that maintaining a curriculum balanced between theory-based teaching versus skills-oriented strategic management teaching, both AcF and FA programmes demand a combination of theoretical knowledge, technical proficiency, and people skills, such as creativity, communication, and social proficiency. However, research by Jeno et al. (2023) who also based their research off another variable of Ryan and Deci's 2017 model of SDT, suggests that when students in specialized programmes perceive their curriculum as highly complex, they may experience diminished motivation and self-efficacy, factors that can increase their dropout likelihood. Additionally, Maluenda-Albornoz et al. (2022) emphasize that socio-academic factors, including perceived curriculum difficulty and integration within the academic environment, can drive dropout decisions.

Therefore, this study posits that FA students, owing to the distinct academic demands of FA, may have higher dropout rates compared to their AcF counterparts. By testing this hypothesis, the research aims to contribute by providing insights into how curriculum design and targeted support may mitigate dropout risks in high-demand accounting specializations. This leads to the second hypothesis:

H2. The dropout rates in FA will be higher than AcF.

5. Research design

5.1 Data

This study adopts an empirical, positivist approach. This study is via analysis of secondary data collated by the university's administrative teams, a natural source of information (Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner, 2014) of students' demographics, including gender, ethnicity, and reason for leaving the accounting programme. Each student must write why they are leaving their course as part of the University's leaving mechanism. Ethnicity data has been collected from the university administration database. University administrators collect the information of Chinese and (other) Asian students independently, because of partnerships that have been developed with Chinese universities. The research team has ethical approval and clearance under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

In alignment with GDPR, as each student is required to record their reason for leaving as part of a formal exit process, the research team subsequently coded into standardized categories. This analysis spans a 10-year period (2011–2021) across the ACF and FA programmes, distinguishing dropout trends in the two programmes and facilitating longitudinal insights. Data is not collected beyond 2021, because following the 2021 census, student data has been recorded in line with the UK government's Ethnicity harmonised standard. Thus, a comparison of results is not achievable on a like-with-like basis beyond 2021.

This study also addresses a critical gap in the higher education and dropout literature by focusing exclusively on two professional accounting programmes over an extended period—a focus largely absent in prior foundational studies (e.g., Tinto and Cullen, 1973; Guney, 2009). Previous research has primarily targeted broader student populations or provided cross-sectional analyses, often without consideration for programme-specific dropout challenges within professional fields. By analyzing the complete student population within two accounting disciplines, this study enhances predictive validity (Gujarati, 2002) and provides a unique, detailed account of dropout patterns specific to accounting education.

Over the period analysed, 6,948 students were enrolled, with 6,085 on the AcF programme and 863 on the FA programme. The university is a 'typical' post-92 university in the UK. Therefore, in terms of the demographics of students, the findings can be considered generalisable for similar universities in the UK and/or Europe. Dropout rates revealed distinctive patterns, with 5.1% (294 students) of AcF

enrollees and 6.5% (53 students) of FA students failing to complete their studies. The final sample thus includes 347 students who withdrew over the decade, enabling robust statistical analysis of demographic and programmatic factors.

5.2 Methodology

The study's research design adopts an empirical approach towards the 10-year period covered here to include the timing and reasons why undergraduate students drop out. The coding scheme used in the analysis of the data is developed in an iterative way, following a deductive, inductive procedure of qualitative content analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the first stage, codes and themes are generated based on the literature before coding the data (Adu, 2019). In addition to the analysis of the first hypothesis on the personal and situational dimensions, this study also focuses on the second hypothesis based on the analysis of course-specific dimensions. The population is divided into two groups: AcF and FA students. Next, t-tests are adopted to examine any relationship between ethnicity, gender, and dropout between the two groups. T-tests are used because they are shown to be established indicators of differences in a classroom environment based on a sample of more than 30 (Lim and Mali, 2021; Mali and Lim, 2021; Mali et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2008). A binary coding system is used where a dropout student is classified as 1. If a student does not drop out, the student is classified as 0. Additionally, a value of 1 is used if the student is female and 0 for male.

6. Results

Using the data collected by the university's administrative teams (Table 1), the overall results show a collective dropout of just below 5 percent (4.99%) of 347 students out of a total of 6,948 who entered the course. This is a cause for concern for this institution as the courses are losing an average of thirty students per academic year.

<Inset Table 1 here>

Analysis of the timing of when the students leave the course (Figure 2) indicated that a consistent ten-year pattern of dropout occurs at the start of the academic year, especially in levels 4 and 5, i.e., the first and second years, respectively. The largest spikes are at the end of the academic year, for example, in July. The key reason for dropouts at the academic year-end was that students received poor marks or could not proceed due to not passing their examinations, i.e., academic failure.

<Inset Figure 2>

The next set of results examine and explain the main reasons for students' dropout and how that dropout varies dramatically depending on which ethnic group they identify as belonging to. Table 2 reveals the primary reasons why students drop out of accounting courses.

<Inset Table 2 here>

6.1 Tinto factors

Since Tinto's theory of student departure, there has been little variation but much consensus as to why students drop out of their courses. There are two main reasons: a student's commitment to the university they belong to and their own personal commitment to study. The more students can integrate into their university from both an academic and social aspect, the more likely they are to stay on the course. Similarly, an accounting course should be no different. As shown in Figure 1, dropout reasons are categorised into four key areas - internal, voluntary, personal, and external factors. Below, we explain how we perceive the results, as a basis to offer suggestions to educators.

6.1.1 Internal factors

Internal factors primarily refer to academic challenges or issues directly related to student performance and engagement. The most significant internal factor identified in this study is academic failure. Although this study cannot identify why the students have failed, other research has identified that academic failure is often associated with insufficient academic preparation, poor study habits, or failure to meet programme requirements (Osman et al. 2018; Koh and Koh 1999). To help prevent failure, we posit that academic support systems, such as tutoring and mentoring, may need to be strengthened, particularly for students in more specialized programmes like FA.

Our views as educators are that when a student starts to fail in either of the two accounting degrees, it becomes a vicious downward cycle that they then struggle to get out of. If they trail modules in any academic year, students will struggle, with additional pressure to not only try to pass their new-level modules but also to retake and pass their trailing modules. It could well be that they are missing or cannot grasp the core knowledge and understanding of the previous year's modules that they need for the next-level modules. Schoenfeld et al. (2017) suggest that if the student is sold on the idea of putting the right level of time, effort, and skill development into their degree, this will result in the student obtaining a good degree and, therefore, gaining good future job prospects, thus reducing dropout. It is however, a difficult balance for tutors to stress the commitment required to complete an accounting degree but not put students off due to their fear of the intense workload.

Another internal factor is the perception that the course is unsuitable. This reason was cited more often for FA students than for AcF students. This dissatisfaction may stem from a mismatch between students' expectations and the course content or career outcomes, highlighting the importance of clearer programme descriptions and better guidance to ensure alignment with students' academic and professional goals. For example, some students join with an incorrect skillset, believing that accounting requires strong analytical and numerical skills (Smith et al., 2020; Brooke and Roberts, 2021). Other pedagogic tools, for example, case studies (Pelzer et al., 2023), research-informed teaching intervention (Mali and Lim, 2022) and social media (Kainama, 2015) have been suggested as ways that improve a student's academic performance and hence reduce dropout. The integration of such tools may, therefore, have the potential to mitigate dropout rates.

6.1.2 Voluntary factors

Voluntary factors include reasons that reflect students' personal decisions to leave the program, often based on changing interests or life circumstances. A notable voluntary factor is the decision to transfer to another institution. Tinto (1975) suggests that an individual could perform well academically yet still drop out due to inadequate social integration within the institution. Since more AcF students transfer than FA students could reflect dissatisfaction with the course or a desire to pursue a different programme elsewhere. This potential outcome speaks to universities needing to better manage student expectations and ensure that students are well-informed before deciding to transfer. We observe that students sometimes stay at the university yet change their course. This indicates that some students may realise, midway through their studies, that their chosen programme does not align with their interests or career goals, leading them to switch to a different course to fulfill their educational goals (Kehm et al., 2019).

Also in this area, there is a small percentage of students who leave their courses entirely and enter the working world (Table 2). This suggests that some students prioritise immediate financial independence or career opportunities over continuing their education without undue stress. Hence, these factors significantly shape young people's perspectives, influenced by their aspirations and economic environment.

6.1.3 Personal factors

Personal factors refer to individual circumstances often beyond the student's immediate control. Taking up employment, managing work and study commitments, health concerns, caring

responsibilities, and financial reasons are well-documented student challenges in higher education (e.g., Tinto, 1975; Wilcox et al., 2005). Health reasons were cited as having a higher incidence among FA students. Health issues, both physical and mental, can significantly affect a student's ability to continue with their studies, especially in mentally demanding programmes like FA. Péng et al. (2022) who highlight that health issues, particularly mental health challenges, are increasingly associated with dropout risk, as these conditions can reduce students' capacity to prioritize their studies, emphasizing the influence of mental health on academic persistence.

Domestic circumstances, such as caring responsibilities or family problems (Table 2), with FA students reporting slightly higher rates than AcF students. These personal responsibilities can interfere with academic focus and progress, necessitating flexible support systems that can accommodate students facing such challenges. Maternity was another personal factor influencing dropout, though it was only noted by AcF students and not FA students. Lastly, work commitments were cited and are especially pertinent for non-traditional students who balance academic work with full or part-time jobs. These issues are often exacerbated in fields requiring intensive study and practical applications, like accounting, where external demands can make it difficult for students to maintain their academic commitments.

6.1.4 External factors

External factors involve circumstances beyond the student's direct control. Financially excluded (non-payment) students accounted for a slightly higher incidence among FA students (Table 2). This was a decision taken by the university to withdraw the student due to the non-payment of fees. Another external factor is the perception that university study was not what was expected, and this reason could be attributed to personal dissatisfaction; it can also be influenced by external factors such as unclear communication from the institution or unmet expectations regarding academic support. Finally, some students preferred not to disclose their reasons for leaving, which could reflect a range of external factors, but are not fully communicated by the students.

6.2 FA versus AcF

The data presented in Tables 3a and 3b reveal a small but notable difference in dropout rates, with FA experiencing a slightly higher percentage dropout rate of 6.14% compared to AcF at 4.83%. This difference is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. When analysing Hypothesis two, which states that the dropout rates are significantly higher in FA, there is a concern that indeed students are dropping out

of the FA degree more than the AcF degree. This is disappointing given that students in the FA programme at this university, typically enter with higher academic averages and seemingly greater intrinsic motivation to specialize in this area. The key reason for dropping out of FA is academic failure (see Ajjawi et al., 2020; Li and Carroll, 2017).

<Inset Tables 3a and 3b>

Significant dropout rate disparities are observed across ethnic groups, with Arab students exhibiting the highest rates in both AcF and FA. This pattern suggests potential educational or support-related challenges unique to certain demographics. By contrast, Asian and White students demonstrate lower dropout rates, particularly in AcF, indicating a need to examine further support structures or academic preparation disparities that might affect ethnic groups differently within these programmes. The data also reveal subtle yet important gender-based differences in dropout rates. In both the AcF and the FA programme, females show a lower dropout rate compared to males (4.90% vs. 4.70%), for the AcF programme and (6.30% vs. 5.80%) for the FA programme.

Given FA's specialised nature, the higher dropout rate could be linked to students' ability to understand the complexity of the curriculum, which includes legal frameworks, fraud detection techniques, investigative methods, and ethical considerations (ACFE, 2019). As Van Akkeren and Tarr (2022) and Curtis et al. (2009) argue, the cognitive demands associated with FA necessitate a level of technical skill and resilience that might be difficult for some undergraduate students to acquire quickly. We acknowledge that caution is required when interpreting the above result, which includes small samples. For example, one Arab represents a 100% dropout for FA, whilst 5 dropouts would represent 12.24% for AcF. However, with these limitations in mind, the above findings imply that while students may enroll in FA with strong motivations, the high technical and theoretical requirements might overwhelm them, particularly early in the programme. This aligns with the literature suggesting that an FA curriculum, while essential, requires careful pacing and a structured approach to introduce complex concepts without overwhelming students (Curtis et al., 2009). Implementing a more gradual progression through core FA topics, with early exposure to practical case studies or simplified scenarios, might improve dropout by reducing the initial cognitive load on students.

6.3 Comparison of dropouts by ethnicity and gender in total

In the first four columns of Table 4, descriptive statistics are provided for the programme completion

and dropout numbers for students. The right two columns are the results of t-tests, comparing the dropout rates of both groups. The results from t-tests delineated in Panel A show that the dropout FA students are higher, compared to AcF, for the total (1.978*) and white student samples (2.172*). For Arab, Chinese, Other and Mixed groups, there are insufficient observations to conduct an analysis because there is not sufficient data to conduct empirical tests. For the Asian sample, the difference in dropout rates for AcF and FA students does not vary. Panels B and C also show that regardless of male (1.978*) or female (2.175*) partitioning, (total) FA students are more likely to drop out compared to AcF students. The above allows us to accept the second hypothesis.

<Inset Tables 4a, 4b and 4c>

6.4 Comparison of dropouts by ethnicity and gender in relation to white students

Table 5 compares the dropout rate among male/female students against the largest white male/female group. For the white student sample, 4.84% of males dropped out compared to a female dropout of 5.12%. T-test results show the percentage of Arab males dropping out is statistically significantly lower (-3.00***), compared to white counterparts. However, the percentage among Asian males (2.67**) and 'Other' males (1.80*) is higher at the 0.05 and 0.10 significance levels. These results indicate that they are more likely to drop out, relative to their white counterparts. The dropout t-test results for 'Mixed' and 'Chinese' male groups are -1.14 and 1.41, respectively and therefore are not considered to be statistically significant to the white student group.

When female student dropout rates are compared against the largest (white) ethnicity group, the results are varied: Asian and Chinese females are negative and statistically not significant. The dropout rate for Arab females is higher than the white student group and is statistically significant (6.58***). The 'Other' and 'Mixed' female categories present more complex scenarios. For the Other female group, the dropout rate of -1.64 indicates a slight retention advantage but the results are not statistically significant. Mixed females show a higher statistically significantly positive dropout rate of 1.93*.

Table 5, therefore shows critical disparities and inequalities in dropout rates by ethnicity and gender, highlighting the unique challenges faced by both male and female students across different ethnic groups. The results overall provide additional support for the first hypothesis, i.e., students from more

diverse cultural, ethnic, and gender backgrounds are more likely to drop out than their white male/female counterparts.

<Inset Table 5>

6.5 Statement about the Covid period

The data for this study spans the Covid-19 period. An analysis was conducted to compare dropout rates before/during the Covid-19 period. However, we find that results before/during the Covid-19 period are not statistically different.

7 Discussion and Recommendations

The authors acknowledge that the most important question for the academic community can be to have asked students that have dropped out “how could we have better supported you?”. However, it is not practical to contact this student group. There can be an ethical problem associated with questioning students that potentially drop out. In a situation where a student was asked to take an interview for research which is not ‘normal’, the stress associated with the interview may have a negative effect on the student’s decision to remain on the course. Moreover, we are not aware of a mechanism in place that would categorise students as (potentially) dropping out. Furthermore, it would not be possible to question students that have dropped out, because personal details are not disclosed due to data protection considerations. Therefore, it is not feasible to directly ask students that have dropped out or are thinking about dropping out “how could we have better supported you?”

We have however identified that failure is a strong reason as to why students dropout and we are the first paper (to our knowledge) that demonstrates that this theme of failure continues throughout the accounting programmes at all levels and occurs disproportionately to those students who are female and from an ethnically diverse background. Dropout rates negatively affect an institution’s reputation and funding, making strategies to prevent dropout and retain students critical for policymakers (Lacave et al., 2018; Delen, 2012). Universities in the UK face a unique challenge to widen participation in all courses, not just accounting (Mellors and Vicencio 2025). They are also tasked with being run as a commercial operation and therefore must recruit and reduce dropout as much as possible in order help maintain student numbers and therefore maintain their profitability and status, as described by Eastman (2016). Therefore, this research helps with dropout debates by suggesting that prevention policies should incorporate specialized support systems, and curriculum modifications that resonate

with these disadvantaged accounting students' unique social and academic challenges. However, this support type of support creates pressures of time, money, and resource for all universities not just those in the UK (Mali et al., 2023).

These pressures can create a difficult decision in whether to allow failing students with trailing modules to continue their studies or not. Although there seems to be an obvious answer to fail the students and not allow them to progress to the next level until they have successfully completed their current level, there is the pressure to allow the students to remain (or progress) on the course. Although there may be extenuating circumstances for a particular student, allowing all failing students to continue to their next level of study with trailing modules from the previous level risks exacerbating dropout rates. Students in such situations may face reduced university access, less contact time with tutors, and an overall diminished university experience, all of which could increase their likelihood of leaving.

Following Tinto's thematics, dropout can be categorised into the key areas of academic and social integration: commitment by the University towards student success and academic preparedness (Hepworth et al. 2018). Many of the studies in this area reflect that for a student to be successful in university life and hence prevent dropout, a sense of access, belonging and the ability to participate is required by the student, especially those from underrepresented communities (Hamshire et al., 2025; Kahu et al., 2022; Freeman et al., 2007; Tinto 1975). Other studies on student success and reducing dropout also find that there is a need for a student to have strong family support to help create resilience in the student (Chiramba and Nyoni 2024), support from their peers (Longfellow et al. 2018), and friends (Schreiner 2020).

Research that specifically focuses on success in accounting had similar findings that would help to prevent dropout. For example, there is research into the lack of academic preparedness, especially amongst first-year students (Joynt 2023, Baard et al 2010; Steenkamp et al. 2009, Du Plessis et al. 2005, Kidwell 2005, Makinen et al. 2004 and McInnis 2001). However, there are very few researchers that go beyond just focusing on the student's preparedness in accounting. One of the few that do is Byrne and Flood in 2005, who suggest that universities, in particular lecturers, should note first-year students' prior knowledge, assumptions and motivations help them with their studies, and in turn help them to be successful in their studies and not a failure.

Shek and Chai (2020) suggest that rather than seeing struggling students as problematic, universities should focus on the students' strengths to motivate them and prevent dropout. Student engagement in the classroom is also necessary (Precourt and Gainor, 2019), linking a positive relationship between students' higher classroom attendance, frequency, and participation in class with better exam performance. Additionally, creating a supportive sub-culture for students, as suggested by Venuleo et al. (2016), has the potential to contribute to reducing dropout rates.

This UK university has an underrepresentation of female students, and students from non-majority ethnic backgrounds in accounting programmes. This trend is consistent with global research (Rogers and Creed, 2011; Cory et al., 2010). These anomalies of race and gender also exist in the accounting profession itself despite extensive efforts towards 'inclusion' (Bird et al., 2016; Dalton et al., 2014). For instance, Alanezi et al. (2016) claim that fewer females are pursuing a career in accounting, and Iacone (2019) declares that only 9% of accountants and auditors in the US are African American. Thus, attracting students from diverse backgrounds has the potential to reflect social diversity and inclusion.

Pelzer and Nkansa (2022) commented on the underrepresentation of minorities in the profession despite the best efforts of professional bodies, accounting organizations, and accounting educators. Therefore, universities and the profession must find different ways to reach out to these groups and help them avoid dropping out of accounting courses. Factors influencing prospective students include understanding the subject, personal interest, earning potential, and job satisfaction (Oben and Van Rooyen, 2023). Creating social events can foster a culture of inclusion, which in turn can help prevent dropout (Marschall et al., 2023).

Supporting first-generation students requires special attention, too. They will have less insight and ability than their more advantaged peers (Clayton et al., 2009; David et al., 2003) and provide more support to avoid trailing modules and academic failure (Chen and Carroll, 2005). Mentorship programmes are another effective strategy for improving retention among underrepresented minority students. Buelow et al. (2018) highlight the critical role of mentorship in fostering academic success, particularly for minority students who may feel isolated or lack confidence in their ability to succeed. Some researchers suggest that to help underrepresented minority students undertaking accounting degrees, they should be assigned a mentor by accounting firms and other stakeholders to generate positive student experiences. A positive mentoring process gives minority students more information about the profession (Pelzer and Nksanka, 2022; Hermanson et al., 2016). Such experiences can improve any negative self-efficacy minority students may have in their ability to

complete an accounting degree. According to Roberts et al. (2023), a good supportive mentor or role model could increase all students' self-efficacy, thus increasing the likelihood of a student staying on the course. We post that establishing such programmes may also address the university's identification of strategies to reduce dropout among minority groups.

Student development theory has created positive outcomes in student retention. A study by Patterson et al. (2021) noted that retention can be improved for students from minority backgrounds by the introduction of social-belonging interventions via the use of video clips from previous students of different ages, races, and genders. Four key messages were conveyed to every student: feeling out of place, worries about making friends, not being prepared for college, and that this feeling will disappear over time. However, universities need to be careful, as Carey (2004) warns that messages from students of different races and genders could inadvertently reinforce stereotypes. Therefore, Carey recommends concentrating more on the students' background rather than race, as US statistics suggest that students from an underprivileged background only have a 1 in 7 chance of graduating (Bathmaker, 2021; Carey, 2004).

Students also choose to study accounting without a clear understanding of the course obtained earlier from career advice (Ahmed et al., 2017; Alanezi et al., 2016; Barac and Steyn, 2012). Therefore, researchers suggest that more contact is needed with high schools to increase the numbers applying to study accounting at university (Suryani, 2018; Sugahara et al., 2009; Low et al., 2008). This would help increase personal interest but potentially correct the hostile view that accounting is boring and dropping out does not establish excellent future work opportunities (Schoenfeld et al., 2017; Aminu and Timothy, 2014; Zakaria et al., 2012; Van Wyk, 2011; Sugahara et al., 2008; Tan and Laswad, 2006; Gracia and Jenkins, 2002; Albrecht and Sack, 2000).

8 Limitations

Guney (2009) provides evidence that various characteristics apart from gender and ethnicity influence dropout rates, such as disability and family income. For this study, the student database does not provide this information, and hence, this is not included in the analysis. Future studies can be undertaken to determine whether additional student-specific factors can impact dropout. Another limitation is that the sample is the population of students from a single UK university, which may limit the generalizability of its findings to other institutions with different student populations, educational environments, or cultural contexts. The factors contributing to dropout rates could vary significantly

across different universities or countries, especially considering the student body's diversity and financial circumstances.

Another limitation is that the study risks bias due to self-reporting. Students may underreport sensitive issues like financial difficulties, mental health struggles, or academic failures due to stigma or personal reluctance to share. This could lead to inaccuracies in understanding the true factors driving attrition, especially in complex or private matters. This study identifies failure as the main reason for students dropping out. It does not identify why the student fails as this was not available in the data. Therefore, there should be future studies on failure to comprehend why and what causes the student to fail. However, asking a student why they failed may indeed prompt the student to leave. Additionally, tracking students down after they leave and their willingness to participate may be difficult due to sensitive issues or may cause embarrassment to the student.

Finally, the emphasis and focus on dropouts dominate the current scholarly discussion. However, Hoyt and Winn (2004) stress the significance of treating these students as a homogeneous group regarding their withdrawal. They encourage a more nuanced approach by classifying non-returning students into four subcategories: dropouts, stop-outs, opt-outs, and transfer-outs. This study recommends that future researchers develop empirical research based on these profiles at all levels of the accounting programme.

9 Future Research

This is a snapshot of one university in this dropout study and needs to be replicated to include other universities. Additionally, this study can be redesigned to include longitudinal qualitative data of students who have dropped out. The findings also highlight the limitations of relying solely on statistical significance. While the dropout rates are not statistically different, the practical implications of FA's higher attrition rate warrant further investigation. The alignment of curriculum requirements with student preparedness and academic resilience should be by academics critically analysed to ensure that avoidable challenges do not hinder high-performing, motivated students. Moreover, based on evidence that the pattern of delivery can affect student performance (Roberts et al., 2022), future studies may investigate how front/backloading core subjects on academic programmes may affect student retention.

Future research could provide a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between personal and academic factors that contribute to student attrition. It should further investigate how sociocultural

elements—such as family expectations, cultural attitudes towards education, and gender —affect academic persistence. This qualitative study could involve interviews or small focus groups with students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds to explore their specific challenges, how these challenges influence their academic decisions, and ways universities can improve their retention and success. This approach would offer valuable insights into supporting students effectively.

10 Conclusion

This study empirically examines the factors contributing to the attrition of undergraduate accounting students at a UK university in the AcF and FA programmes over a decade (2011–2021). The study demonstrates that a complex interplay of internal, voluntary, personal, and external factors drives student dropout in the AcF and FA programmes. Academic failure is the most significant factor, followed by voluntary decisions such as transferring to another institution or entering employment. Personal factors like health issues and domestic circumstances, as well as external factors such as financial difficulties, further exacerbate dropout rates. Understanding these factors can help universities design more targeted interventions, such as academic support, financial aid, and mental health services, to reduce dropout rates and improve student retention, particularly in specialised programmes like FA.

The study's results confirm Hypothesis 1, which posits that students from historically underrepresented ethnic and gender groups face distinct challenges affecting their retention. and potential future success. Analysing dropout rates in AcF and FA programmes provides insights into Hypothesis 2, which posits that dropout rates are higher in FA. While the statistical evidence supports this hypothesis, critical evaluation reveals underlying complexities that challenge its practical implications. Significant disparities emerge when examining specific demographic groups. These findings highlight the importance of addressing broader systemic challenges, such as culturally responsive support structures and tailored interventions, to improve retention across diverse student populations.

Demographic factors, particularly ethnicity, offer a more critical lens. Differences in dropout rates become apparent when analysed by gender and ethnicity. For example, female students in FA exhibit marginally higher dropout rates than their male counterparts, though these differences are also not statistically significant, and dropout rates for Arab students are markedly higher across both programmes, indicating underlying socio-academic challenges rather than programme-specific factors.

There have been other investigations to try to establish which students may drop out of university (Lacave et al., 2018; Delen, 2012), but there is nothing as comprehensive as this study in accounting that captures the reasons, the timing, the ethnicity and gender backgrounds of the students in relation to how, when and why students drop out of AcF and FA courses, over the 10 years considered in this study. This study uses a comprehensive empirical analysis approach to investigate why students drop out, based on characteristics. Thus, this study provides insights to accounting educators to help them plan their available resources to focus on critical areas and times of the year to target specific, at-risk students and prevent them from leaving either in the first year, their second year, or even their final year of undergraduate study.

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