

Cultural capital and university dropout in Saudi Arabia: A qualitative case study of students withdrawing from university Education

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Abstract

This study explored the role of cultural capital in student dropout at several Saudi universities, drawing on Bourdieu's theory. A qualitative case study approach was employed, with data collected through open-ended interviews and simple observation. The sample comprised 10 participants from two public universities. The results identified eight common factors contributing to university dropout, grouped into three main themes: factors related to the initial adaptation phase, those associated with academic and social integration, and those regarding the actual withdrawal phase. Specifically, the findings highlighted poor language skills and previously acquired academic habits, limited freedom and guidance in choosing a major, low parental educational and cultural levels, ineffective academic advising, symbolic violence by some faculty members, weak peer interaction and social integration, academic failure linked to lack of parental monitoring, and limited access to academic resources due to low family economic status as the most significant contributors to dropout. The researchers provided several recommendations for enhancing students' cultural capital and reducing university dropout.

Keywords University Dropout · Cultural Capital · Saudi Arabia · Withdrawn Students

Introduction

Throughout history, societies have experienced conflicts and changes that have affected social mobility, upward and downward. Humans strive to improve their social status, but cultural, social, and economic factors shape their ability to climb the social ladder. In some closed societies, social mobility is limited by inherited traditions or personal obstacles, while other societies offer greater opportunities for advancement based on merit and effort.

Education is one of the most important avenues for social mobility in the modern era, as an individual's income and social status are closely linked to their educational level and professional experience. Universities play a crucial role in preparing individuals for various professions, influencing their standard of living and social standing (Al-Sisi, 2022).

Education has received significant attention in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, as it is considered a cornerstone of progress. Accordingly, the vision includes comprehensive development plans for the entire educational system. Targets have also been set to improve the global rankings of Saudi universities (Al-Yami, 2018).

University dropout remains one of the most pressing challenges facing the education system, representing a waste of financial and intellectual resources and a loss of human capital that should be prepared to enter the labor market (Hadid, 2016).

Study problem

University education is costly compared to other economic and social activities, and educational institutions generally assume that most students will graduate within a set time frame. However, high rates of dropout and academic failure result in significant financial losses for the country, in addition to the loss of qualified human talent needed to supply the specialized labor market (AlNaimi, 2018).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia provides free university education to all citizens; nonetheless, dropout rates remain high. The primary objective of the preparatory year preceding entry into academic specialization at Saudi universities is to bridge the gap between general and university education by developing skills that support students' academic success. Al-Baladi (2023) found that some of the main reasons for dropout

among preparatory year students at King Abdulaziz University were feelings of inadequacy, difficulty learning English, and weak memorization skills. This was corroborated by Al-Naimi (2018), who concluded that one of the strongest predictors of dropout among preparatory year students at Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University was low grades in the preparatory year, as well as low high school grades.

According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital influences students' academic success through the possession of symbolic assets, such as being cultured, proficient in a particular language, or familiar with the symbols of the social world. This type of cultural capital, acquired through socialization, enables students to achieve academic success. Bourdieu also emphasizes that the preparatory path before university admission functions as a "selection and screening" mechanism, as success may require specific language skills that individuals from lower socioeconomic classes typically lack (Al-Khathlan, 2019).

There is a research gap in studies linking cultural capital and university dropout in the Saudi context, particularly those using qualitative approaches. Quantitative studies conducted in Saudi society have focused on addressing dropout among university students (Al-Duhailan, 2015) or examining the causes and predictors of this phenomenon (Al-Baladi, 2023; AlNaimi, 2018). Therefore, the study problem lies in the need to explore the role of cultural capital in the university dropout of students leaving Saudi universities.

Significance of the study

Scientific significance

The study addresses a critical issue at a time when the Kingdom is experiencing significant developmental advances across all sectors, including the cultural domain. To this end, it examines the relationship between cultural capital and university dropout. The study also contributes to the localization of Bourdieu's theory and the reinterpretation of its concepts by adapting them to the unique social, cultural, and institutional characteristics of Saudi society, enhancing the theory's explanatory power within these specific social structures.

Applied significance

This study focuses on an important educational and economic issue using a qualitative approach. This approach emphasizes understanding the phenomenon of university dropout in its specific context rather than generalizing the findings. Such understanding, in turn, helps provide recommendations to address the challenges that prevent many students from completing their studies. The study also supports educational and economic institutions in identifying the key factors contributing to university dropout and developing strategies to overcome these challenges.

Study questions

- What is the role of cultural capital in university dropout among the study participants?
- What factors contributed to the weakness of cultural capital among the study participants?
- What social and environmental factors contributed to university dropout among the study participants?

Study objectives

- Identify the role of cultural capital in university dropout among the study participants.
- Identify the factors that contributed to the weakness of cultural capital among the study participants.
- Identify the social and environmental factors that contributed to university dropout among the study participants.

Study terminology

Cultural capital

Cultural capital is defined as "the legitimate knowledge and social attitudes transmitted through socialization processes, parental education, social and familial networks, and other privilege-related connections" (Karadag & Ciftci, 2023, p. 3). It is also described as "a collection of cultural assets or resources accumulated over a lifetime through relationships and events in the family environment" (Nunes and Silva, 2024, p. 1).

University dropout

University dropout is defined as “the interruption of preparatory year students’ university studies, whether completely or partially, whether by choice, due to academic weakness, or other circumstances” (Al-Baladi, 2023, p. 733).

Theoretical framework

Introduction to Bourdieu’s theory of capital

In 1973, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposed the first theory of cultural capital in the field of educational attainment, arguing for a close relationship between cultural capital and educational success (Bourdieu, 1977). The theory provides a robust analytical framework for understanding how social inequalities are reproduced through education (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). Bourdieu’s interconnected concepts of “Habitus,” “Field,” and “Forms of Capital” offer a framework for understanding the factors influencing students’ decisions to drop out of university.

Key concepts of the theory

Bourdieu explained university dropout through the relationship between a student’s social background and the culture of the educational institution, using three key concepts.

The first concept is “Habitus,” which refers to the ingrained tendencies and behavioral patterns acquired by students through early socialization within their family and social class (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). Habitus formed in environments with limited exposure to university education—especially among first-generation students—creates feelings of alienation and adaptation difficulties, which can predict dropout (Wong and Liao, 2022).

The second concept is “Field,” which refers to the social arena where individuals and groups compete for resources and recognition (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). Universities constitute a hierarchical field, where success requires understanding and navigating its norms—what Bourdieu calls “Game Sense” (Toyon, 2024). The structure of the university environment can either facilitate or hinder students’ adaptation to their habitus, depending on how well their behavior aligns with the field’s demands (Wong and Liao, 2022).

The third concept concerns the three forms of capital. Social capital represents relationships with peers and faculty that provide support, enhancing students’ confidence and employability, reducing the risk of dropout (Toyon, 2024). Economic capital reflects family wealth (Ziada, 2024); students from lower economic backgrounds may struggle to afford university or be forced to work while studying, increasing their likelihood of dropping out (Wong and Liao, 2022). Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and cultural assets acquired through socialization (Ziada, 2024). Students lacking this capital—particularly first-generation or rural students—face greater adaptation challenges and are more prone to drop out (Min, 2020).

Forms of cultural capital

Bourdieu identified three forms of cultural capital that influence university dropout. The first is embodied cultural capital, which includes knowledge, skills, behaviors, and language proficiency (Ziada, 2024). The second is objectified cultural capital, referring to material assets owned by the family, such as books and artwork in the home (Assulaimani and Althubaiti, 2021). The third is institutionalized cultural capital, which encompasses the educational and professional levels of students’ parents (Karadag and Ciftci, 2023). Students from families with higher levels of education tend to possess greater embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital, which facilitates their adaptation to university life (Assulaimani and Althubaiti, 2021).

Localizing the theory in Saudi society

Bourdieu developed his theory through studies of French society, which necessitates reinterpreting and adapting his concepts to reflect the distinctive social, cultural, and institutional characteristics of Saudi society.

The phenomenon of university dropout in Saudi society reflects structural social, economic, and cultural inequalities. Despite free university education, disparities exist in access to educational resources across socioeconomic classes, differences in cultural preparedness and linguistic capital depending on the type of general education school (public, private, or international), as well as variations in family and societal expectations shaped by geographic and class affiliations and in family support structures.

In Saudi society, habitus is strongly influenced by family background and geographic location. Students from families with a history of higher education enrollment or urban areas such as Jeddah or Riyadh may experience a more favorable environment for meeting university expectations, due to the distinct habitus of their social class and urban upbringing—for example, exposure to international travel, a bilingual or multilingual home environment, and the perception of university education as a natural path. Conversely,

students from less educated families or rural areas such as Al-Ahsa or Asir may face a mismatch with university expectations because of the restrictive habitus of their social class and rural or Bedouin environment, such as limited exposure to other societies, a monolingual Arabic environment, and a practical, tangible orientation. These factors increase their risk of dropout, particularly in English-taught programs.

The Saudi university system is a hierarchical field, with university rankings and gender-segregated academic disciplines. Students from modest socioeconomic backgrounds attending prestigious universities, such as King Saud University and King Abdulaziz University—which prioritize international rankings, emphasize scientific research, and offer many English-language programs—face greater challenges than students at regional universities, such as Qassim University or King Faisal University in Al-Ahsa. Additionally, male and female students tend to enroll in gender-specific academic disciplines. Male-dominated programs offer greater diversity, better facilities, and more direct interaction with faculty. Female students may face limited program choices (particularly in technical fields), indirect interaction with faculty via electronic media, and career paths restricted by gender norms, which can increase their risk of dropout.

Bourdieu's three forms of capital are reflected in Saudi society in context-specific ways. Social capital operates through distinct support networks, primarily family and school. Within families, the extended Saudi family provides crucial social capital, offering information about educational opportunities, strategies, and emotional and material support. School-based social capital varies depending on school type. International schools allow students to form peer networks from privileged backgrounds and access alumni networks connected to career opportunities, better preparing them for university and reducing dropout risk. Conversely, public schools primarily provide peers from modest backgrounds, limited connections to elite opportunities, and less preparation for university social mobility, making students less ready for the university environment and more likely to drop out.

As for economic capital, although Saudi universities provide substantial support, including tuition waivers and monthly stipends, it remains an important factor in students' educational trajectories. This influence is reflected in costs not covered by stipends, such as training courses, laptops, software, internet access, and transportation to campus. Economic capital also affects opportunity costs. Students from modest economic backgrounds experience disparities in consumption (clothing, technology, leisure activities) that reflect class differences, face social exclusion from informal peer networks based on shared class background, and encounter symbolic violence through subtle class markers (dialects, behaviors, cultural references), all of which can increase the risk of university dropout.

Cultural capital within the Saudi family is also significant in dropout decisions. Its three forms are transmitted intergenerationally: parents with university education pass on academic writing skills and knowledge of the university system, whereas first-generation students lack this advantage. Cultural capital gained through travel and exposure to global cultures further shapes awareness of diverse perspectives. However, it is unevenly distributed, with upper-class families more likely to travel internationally and less privileged families having limited exposure.

This reinterpretation demonstrates that Bourdieu's theory gains explanatory power when adapted to the Saudi context. The interaction between habitus, field, and forms of capital is shaped by factors specific to Saudi society, including family background, geographic location, gender-segregated academic disciplines, type of general education school, and family support. Therefore, university dropout among Saudi students can be considered a systematic consequence of social reproduction mechanisms embedded within Saudi universities. The focus should be on understanding the ways in which cultural and educational inequalities are reproduced and developing strategies to address them within the Saudi higher education system.

Study methodology

Study approach

This study is an analytical investigation focusing on the culture of the research subjects. The researchers adopted a qualitative case study approach, as it was considered suitable for achieving the study's objectives and examining the histories of the cases to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Study population and sample

The study population comprised all Saudi students who had withdrawn from Saudi universities. As this qualitative study did not aim to generalize its findings, the sample was limited to ten students who had withdrawn from Saudi universities.

While the sample size was limited to ten participants, this was methodologically appropriate given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study. The aim was not statistical generalization, but analytical depth and theoretical insight into the mechanisms through which cultural capital shapes university dropout. Data collection continued until a point of theoretical saturation was reached, whereby additional interviews no

longer yielded substantively new themes but reinforced existing analytical categories. In line with qualitative epistemology, the study prioritizes information power and conceptual richness over numerical representativeness, allowing for meaningful analytical generalization within the Bourdieusian framework. These cases were examined in depth within their residential and social contexts. A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to select participants based on the researchers' judgment that each individual met the criteria for the target sample (Kashroud, 2007). Selection was based on predefined characteristics, including the lack of a stable and sufficient monthly income and low parental education levels, which were considered essential attributes for participation.

Regarding the sample's characteristics, eight participants were from rural areas and resided in villages in Al-Ahsa Governorate, the Eastern Province, while two were from Riyadh. This geographical distribution reflects a focus on rural students, with limited representation of urban students. Socially, participants faced financial difficulties and low levels of parental education. These characteristics indicate a fragility in cultural and social capital among the sample, which may help explain their university dropout, particularly given the economic and social challenges of their low-income rural environments.

The participants had withdrawn from a range of university majors, including agriculture, business administration, Islamic law, electrical engineering, and health sciences, at King Faisal University (Al-Ahsa) and King Saud University (Riyadh). This diversity in majors suggests that the dropout phenomenon is not confined to a single academic discipline but occurs across multiple fields of study.

Study instruments

The study relied on open-ended interviews as the primary data source and observation as a secondary source. Interviews were conducted individually in public locations agreed upon with the participants. Before the interviews, participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided written and audio consent for recording. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and included open-ended questions about family background, academic discipline, experiences and lessons learned in pre-university education, and the cultural, social, and institutional challenges encountered in university. Participants were assured that their data would remain confidential and would be used solely for scientific research purposes. The validity and reliability of the data were ensured as follows:

- **Validity:** The researchers analyzed the data independently and compared their results. The data and interpretations were then returned to participants for verification to ensure alignment with their actual experiences. A qualitative analysis specialist reviewed the results to minimize researcher bias. Detailed contextual explanations supported the conclusions, and previous studies and conceptual frameworks related to the topic were reviewed for comparison.
- **Reliability:** The researchers carefully documented study procedures, data collection, and analysis processes to allow external review. Both researchers jointly coded a portion of the interviews using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant topics and meanings. The remaining interviews were coded separately and systematically reviewed by an independent researcher to enhance reliability.

Qualitative data analysis

The study employed thematic analysis. All interviews were transcribed into separate files, and the transcriptions were compared with the audio recordings for accuracy. The researchers read the responses four times consecutively to gain a comprehensive understanding of their meaning. Subsequently, the data were entered into MAXQDA software and organized according to participants, including ten interview files with withdrawn students, each anonymized with a coded name. During the repeated readings, some observations about the data were noted. The data were classified and descriptively coded using an inductive approach to identify patterns and categories within the raw data.

Although the coding process was primarily inductive, Bourdieu's conceptual distinctions between embodied, institutionalized, and objectified cultural capital were employed as a sensitizing analytical framework rather than as rigid predefined categories. Initial codes emerged directly from participants' narratives and were subsequently interpreted in relation to these theoretical concepts during the analytical phase. This approach allowed empirical meanings to guide the analysis while maintaining theoretical coherence with Bourdieu's framework.

Focus was placed on relevant codes, and connections between them were explored. Similar codes were grouped into main and sub-themes, each associated with a form of cultural capital. Finally, the researchers verified that the themes accurately reflected the meanings of the codes, which formed the basis for writing and discussing the results.

Study results

Based on the data analysis, common factors contributing to university dropout were identified. These factors, categorized according to participant responses, fall into three main themes, each comprising eight sub-themes, all linked to a form of cultural capital.

Factors of university dropout related to the initial adaptation phase (before and during the start of university studies)

Data analysis revealed three factors related to the initial adaptation phase (before and during the start of university studies) that contribute to university dropout: poor language skills and previously acquired academic habits; lack of freedom and guidance in choosing a major; and low educational and cultural level of parents.

Poor language skills and previously acquired academic habits (weak embodied cultural capital)

Bourdieu argues that educational institutions expect students to possess prior cultural capital—knowledge and skills acquired outside the educational institution, primarily within the family (Bourdieu, 1977). As the following quotes from participants illustrate, poor language skills and the absence of academic habits developed during family upbringing and early education—manifestations of weak embodied cultural capital (habitus)—negatively affect students' initial adaptation to university.

Participant 5, who withdrew from King Saud University, stated, “My major is based on Arabic culture, literature terms, grammar, and morphology. It was very difficult at first, given my prior knowledge, and this hindered me, especially because I was the first of my siblings to enter university.”

Participant 6, who withdrew from King Faisal University, said, “I didn't understand how to study like other students. No one in my family had ever been to university before.”

Participant 2, who withdrew from King Saud University, added, “No one taught me how to study, manage my time effectively, or research information. I used to stay up the night before the exam to memorize, and this method worked in high school, but it is not suitable for university because the curriculum requires organized studying and knowledge of academic terminology.”

Participant 8, who withdrew from King Faisal University, commented as follows: “I was the first person in my family to enter university, and it was something new to us. At university, the professor spoke pure English, in a language I couldn't understand because my English is weak.”

These quotes illustrate the impact of weak embodied cultural capital (habitus) acquired within the family or general education institutions on students' initial adaptation to university. They also highlight that Saudi universities, regardless of prestige or regional ranking, assume that incoming students possess a certain level of language proficiency—whether familiarity with academic terminology in Arabic, English proficiency, or academic habits suitable for university courses (such as time management, research skills, and effective memorization strategies). When these skills are lacking—particularly among first-generation students—the mismatch between their habitus and the university field creates difficulties in adapting at the start of their university studies.

These findings suggest that the students' difficulties were not merely individual shortcomings, but reflections of a deeper misalignment between their habitus and the cultural expectations embedded within the university field.

Lack of freedom and guidance in choosing a major (weak institutional cultural capital)

Freedom to choose a university major, along with access to family and institutional guidance that aligns with students' interests and abilities, is crucial in promoting adaptation to university education and reducing early dropout rates (D'Arrigo et al, 2024). However, responses from Saudi students who withdrew from university indicate a lack of freedom and guidance in selecting a major, reflecting weak institutional cultural capital and contributing to initial maladaptation.

Participant 1, from a rural area, stated, “If I could go back in time, I would enroll in the major I wanted directly without wasting time on a second major. I was forced into this major by my father, and I became numb to it; if I succeed, thank God; otherwise, it makes no difference to me.”

Participant 4, also from a rural area, noted the lack of institutional guidance: “I was transferred to the agriculture department, and I don't know anything about how to change majors. There is no guidance from the university or anyone to show you the right path.”

Participant 8, from a rural area, explained, “What bothered me most was that no one from my family or university guided me in choosing a major.”

Participant 10, likewise from a rural area, stated, “I enrolled in this major against my will. My father didn’t help me choose, and I didn’t find any helpful guidance from the professors.”

These quotes illustrate that the absence of freedom and guidance in choosing a major—whether due to family pressure, arbitrary university regulations, or lack of institutional support—was a significant obstacle for students, especially those from rural backgrounds. Choosing a major without personal desire or conscious guidance hindered their initial adaptation during a critical stage, such as the preparatory year. These findings emphasize the importance of family and institutional guidance in fostering academic adaptation and reducing university dropout among preparatory year students in Saudi society.

Taken together, these experiences reveal how institutional norms surrounding major selection operate as culturally loaded mechanisms that systematically advantage students with access to institutionalized cultural capital, while constraining the agency of those whose educational trajectories are shaped by limited guidance and familial authority.

Low educational and cultural level of parents (weak institutional cultural capital)

Bourdieu argues that when parents have low educational and cultural levels, their children inherit limited cultural capital, making it harder for them to understand the “Rules of the Game” at university and adapt to its environment (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). Consistent with this, responses from participants with rural and urban backgrounds indicated that their parents’ low education and cultural levels—a manifestation of weak institutional cultural capital—were key factors in their initial maladaptation to university studies.

Participant 1, from a rural background, stated, “The family environment I grew up in was modest, with a focus on farming and manual labor rather than reading and education.”

Participant 2, from an urban background, noted, “My parents have a modest level of education; my father only reads newspapers, so I didn’t receive any support during my preparatory year.”

Participant 5, from an urban background, explained, “My parents didn’t complete their education, so they had no idea about the majors or what I needed to do to succeed at university.”

Participant 10, from a rural background, added, “My parents never attended university, so they lacked awareness of university studies, systems, and rules, which initially made me feel out of place and lost.”

These quotes show that the low educational and cultural level of parents—reflecting weak institutional cultural capital—contributed to students dropping out because their parents could not provide adequate academic support. Limited knowledge of the “Rules of the Game” at university, including systems, rules, and requirements for academic success, reinforced students’ initial feelings of maladaptation. Importantly, this factor affected students from rural and urban backgrounds—limited institutional cultural capital, rather than geographic location, is a significant contributor to university dropout in Saudi society.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these dynamics illustrate how intergenerational inequalities in institutionalized cultural capital shape students’ capacity to navigate the university field, reinforcing structural disadvantage rather than reflecting individual lack of motivation or effort

Factors of university dropout related to the academic and social integration phase (during university studies)

Data analysis revealed three factors related to the academic and social integration phase (during university studies) that contribute to university dropout: lack of institutional support and effective academic advising; symbolic violence exercised by some faculty members; and poor interaction and social integration with peers.

Lack of effective academic advising (weak institutional cultural capital)

Effective academic advising is a crucial factor in supporting students, particularly those from less educated parental backgrounds, by compensating for weak institutional cultural capital. However, responses from most participants, male and female, indicate a lack of effective academic advising in universities, whether prestigious, such as King Saud University, or regional, such as King Faisal University.

Participant 6, who withdrew from King Faisal University, stated, “The preparatory year was very hard, and there was no academic advising support at the university.”

Participant 2, from King Saud University, added, “I felt marginalized by the university and found no one to listen to my problems or guide me.”

Participant 5, also from King Saud University, explained, “My family knows nothing about the university and its regulations, and I relied on my academic advisor, but I only saw him twice during the entire preparatory year.”

Participant 8, from King Faisal University, noted, “I expected the advising department to provide me with guidance through regular meetings that would help me understand the university’s rules and regulations, but this did not happen.”

These quotes highlight the shortcomings of academic advising, despite its importance as an institutional resource for students with limited cultural capital. Most students who withdrew reported insufficient support and guidance during the preparatory year, leading to feelings of marginalization and poor academic integration. The lack of effective academic advising reduces the ability of students with limited institutional cultural capital to adapt to university requirements, increasing the likelihood of dropout (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021).

These findings highlight that academic advising functions as a key site of cultural mediation within the university; when such institutional support is absent or ineffective, it disproportionately disadvantages students with limited familiarity with the implicit rules governing higher education.

Importantly, this issue is not confined to a particular category of universities but is a common factor in university dropout across urban and rural institutions.

Symbolic violence exercised by some faculty members (weak institutional cultural capital)

According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence is a form of invisible power exercised by those in positions of influence, such as faculty members, through the imposition of academic standards and values that appear neutral but, in reality, undermine students’ academic and social integration, contributing to dropout. Symbolic violence can take several forms, including belittling (condescension and discrimination), value denial (denial of students’ abilities and skills), and overt hostility (Fadl, 2023). Students who withdrew from university repeatedly mentioned experiencing symbolic violence as a factor in their decision to leave.

Participant 2, who withdrew from King Saud University, said, “The treatment I received from some professors was harsh and excessively strict, which contrasted sharply with how we felt with our female teachers in previous stages.”

Participant 10, from King Faisal University, stated, “The professors treat us with arrogance, as if we’re adults like them. In reality, a year ago, we were teenagers in high school, and this stage shapes your entire life without you even realizing it.”

Participant 5, from King Saud University, explained, “When I would ask the professor a question in a lecture, he would respond sarcastically in front of the other students, saying, ‘How can a student reach university and not know this basic information? Go home and study there.’ My family wasn’t educated enough to help me.”

Participant 3, from King Faisal University, noted as follows: “The professors didn’t treat us well; on the contrary, they tried to break us down.”

These quotes illustrate that symbolic violence by faculty members represents weak institutional cultural capital. Several students reported experiencing harsh treatment, arrogance, and denial of their abilities, which served as mechanisms for reproducing social inequality. Students with lower cultural capital were particularly affected, leading to academic and social maladaptation and, ultimately, dropout. The findings indicate that symbolic violence contributed to the dropout of male and female students across urban and rural universities alike.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these interactions demonstrate how symbolic violence operates through seemingly neutral academic practices, legitimizing inequality and discouraging students whose cultural capital does not conform to dominant academic norms

Poor interaction and social integration with peers (weak embodied cultural capital)

Poor interaction and social integration with peers is a key factor that increases the likelihood of university dropout, especially for students lacking cultural and social capital, as Bourdieu (1977) explained. Analysis of participant interviews revealed that poor peer interaction and social integration—a manifestation of weak embodied cultural capital—made it difficult for several students who withdrew from university to adapt to the university environment.

Participant 1, from a rural area, stated as follows: “I didn’t know anyone at the university, and I faced significant difficulties in making friends.”

Participant 9, also from a rural area, noted as follows: “I would sit alone for long hours during breaks, and unlike in high school, I didn’t know anyone, which made me feel isolated.”

Participant 5, from an urban area, explained as follows: “My classmates would get together and work on assignments and research, and I didn’t know how to participate or talk to them, so I gradually withdrew.”

These quotes show that poor social interaction and integration, particularly among students with low embodied cultural capital, contributes to university dropout. Many students reported difficulty forming friendships or peer support networks and struggled to participate in group academic activities. This lack of

social skills and habits stems from weak embodied cultural capital or the university habitus, which hinders their ability to integrate into the university environment.

This pattern underscores that social and academic integration is not merely a matter of personal initiative, but is deeply structured by unequal access to embodied cultural resources that facilitate participation, belonging, and peer recognition within the university field.

Factors of university dropout associated with the actual withdrawal phase

Data analysis revealed two factors associated with the actual withdrawal phase from university education: academic failure resulting from a lack of parental monitoring and supervision and limited access to academic resources due to low family economic status.

Academic failure resulting from a lack of parental monitoring and supervision (weak embodied cultural capital)

From Bourdieu's perspective, the absence of parental monitoring and supervision during university reflects weak embodied cultural capital, which is associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out. Consistent with this, responses from several participants, particularly those from rural backgrounds, indicate that the lack of parental guidance during university was a factor contributing to dropout.

Participant 1, from a rural background, noted as follows: "My parents followed up with me in school, but at university you are responsible for yourself, and consequently, I got a very low GPA, so I dropped out."

Participant 10, also from a rural background, stated as follows: "School was easier and there was supervision, but at university, no one knew about you, so I couldn't succeed."

Participant 6, from a rural background, explained as follows: "In high school, my only concern was passing. My family was only interested in me finishing high school and didn't pay attention to me at university, which made me not care about my grades."

Participant 8, from a rural background, added as follows: "After I entered university, no one from my family asked me about my studies or grades, so I gradually became negligent and eventually dropped out."

These quotes highlight the connection between university dropout and the lack of parental monitoring during university. Students from rural backgrounds reported that the absence of parental educational authority led to decreased self-discipline, academic failure, and ultimately, withdrawal from their studies. According to Bourdieu, the accumulation and transmission of cultural capital within the family is fundamental and a motivating force for children's individual academic achievement (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992).

These findings suggest that academic failure emerges as a cumulative process shaped by the absence of culturally transmitted dispositions related to self-regulation and academic discipline, rather than as an isolated outcome of individual underperformance.

Limited access to academic resources due to low family economic status (weak objectified cultural capital)

According to Bourdieu's framework, weak objectified and economic cultural capital within families leads to limited access to basic academic resources, such as books, internet access, and training courses, which increases the likelihood of university dropout (Bourdieu, 1977). In this study, limited access to academic resources due to low family economic status was repeatedly mentioned as a significant factor in dropout by male and female students from rural and urban backgrounds.

Participant 5, from a rural background, said, "My classmates were enrolled in English language courses, and I couldn't afford them. I felt like I was falling behind, which ultimately led me to drop out."

Participant 2, from an urban background, stated, "I bought books for 1400 riyals in the first semester, but my father refused to let me buy any more in the second semester, so I decided to drop out."

Participant 6, from a rural background, explained, "Now students have iPads, and all the books are in PDF format. My family's circumstances don't allow me to buy an iPad or a computer, so I felt that studying wasn't suitable for me."

Participant 5, from an urban background, added, "I didn't have internet access, and therefore, I couldn't access the resources I needed to write the required research papers and assignments, which led me to drop out because I couldn't pass some courses in the preparatory year."

These quotes show that limited access to academic resources due to low family economic status is a common factor among students who withdrew from university education. Students, regardless of gender or urban/rural background, faced difficulties in enrolling in English courses, purchasing textbooks or devices, and accessing internet services. These findings highlight the importance of exploring mechanisms to improve cultural and educational equity, particularly for students with low objectified cultural capital, to reduce dropout rates among preparatory year students.

Overall, the findings indicate that restricted access to academic resources reflects broader inequalities in objectified cultural capital, constraining students' ability to meet institutional demands and increasing their vulnerability to university dropout.

Discussion of results

This study explored the role of cultural capital in university dropout within the Saudi context. The analysis was guided by Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and related concepts. University dropout emerged as a multi-phase process connected to the broader concept of cultural and educational equity. Eight factors of cultural capital were identified across three main themes, each corresponding to a distinct phase of university dropout. Figure 1 presents the study model illustrating the relationship between cultural capital and the phases of university dropout among students in the Saudi context.

(Figure 1 here)

The results identified three factors related to the initial adaptation phase (before and during university enrollment) that contribute to dropout. The first factor was poor language skills and previously acquired academic habits. This factor, linked to weak embodied cultural capital (*habitus*), was particularly prominent among first-generation students of both genders. These findings align with Bourdieu's concept that the educational field reflects the culture of the dominant class—students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds must acquire the language and terminology of the dominant class to succeed. Similar patterns have been observed in other contexts. Zhu (2020) found that elite-class students at Beijing universities had higher English proficiency than peers from lower socioeconomic classes. Khumalo and Sibanda (2023) reported that rural South African students often possess cultural capital that does not meet urban university expectations, requiring time and support to develop the skills and behaviors needed for academic success.

The second factor concerns the lack of freedom and guidance in choosing a major, especially among students from rural backgrounds. This reflects weak institutional cultural capital and highlights its role in university dropout. The findings in the Saudi context mirror global trends in the reproduction of social inequality. Guo et al (2025) showed that Chinese families with low cultural capital often lack knowledge about university majors, leading to guidance gaps where children's choices are influenced more by social or economic pressures than personal interests. A unique feature in the Saudi context is the combined familial and institutional pressure to choose a major, which can override individual preferences. This underscores the importance of providing effective family guidance and implementing more flexible educational policies to support students' academic adaptation.

The third factor in the initial adaptation phase is the low educational and cultural level of parents. Weak institutional cultural capital among students from rural and urban backgrounds was a key contributor to their initial maladaptation to university studies, which, in turn, increased the likelihood of dropout. These findings align with research in other contexts. Ivemark and Ambrose (2021) found that adaptation challenges among first-generation students in Sweden are closely related to the quantity and quality of cultural capital acquired prior to university. Similarly, Jin (2025) reported that local students in Hong Kong, with greater cultural capital—including proficiency in Cantonese and a deeper understanding of the education system—transition more successfully into academic life compared to non-local students.

In the academic and social integration phase (during university studies), three factors emerged as contributing to dropout. The first is the lack of institutional support and effective academic advising. This factor was reported by most students, across both genders and in urban and rural universities. Bourdieu's framework suggests that students with limited institutional cultural capital, such as knowledge of university rules, struggle to navigate the academic field and are more prone to dropout (O'Shea, 2016). The Saudi context mirrors findings from a systematic review by Apumayta et al (2024), which concluded that inadequate academic advising is a global institutional factor influencing university dropout. Notably, this finding highlights a gap in the Kingdom's Vision 2030 human capital development initiatives, which emphasize academic advising to support career decision-making.

The second factor concerns symbolic violence exercised by some faculty members. Student dropout, across genders and regions, was linked to this form of institutional cultural capital deficiency. Similar patterns have been observed globally. de Oliveira and Volpato (2017) reported that students in Brazil with low cultural capital are more likely to experience symbolic violence from teachers and peers, contributing to withdrawal. These findings underscore the need for more equitable educational policies that address the impact of symbolic violence on vulnerable student populations.

The third factor in the academic and social integration phase is poor interaction and social integration with peers. This factor reflects the influence of low embodied cultural capital on university dropout among Saudi students. These findings align with Bourdieu's central hypothesis on the reproduction of social inequality, which posits that students lacking sufficient embodied cultural capital struggle to develop relationships, share knowledge, and internalize peer norms, making them more vulnerable to dropout (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). Similarly, Xie (2022) found that rural or disadvantaged students in China often

“exclude themselves” from university participation due to perceived gaps in pre-university knowledge and skills, leading to academic and social isolation and an increased risk of dropout.

Two factors were identified in the actual withdrawal phase. The first is academic failure resulting from a lack of parental monitoring and supervision, particularly among students from rural backgrounds. These results support Bourdieu's framework, which emphasizes that weak family cultural capital reflects deficiencies in educational habitus, including values of self-monitoring, study habits, and academic responsibility—core components of cultural capital that influence university success (Tilbrook and Shifrer, 2022). Conversely, studies in the Chinese context, such as those of Zhu (2020), suggest that cultural capital has limited influence on grades, which are more closely tied to individual effort. Locally, the findings highlight a gap in the Ministry of Education's policies and the Kingdom's Vision 2030 initiatives, which emphasize stronger partnerships between families and educational institutions.

The second factor in the withdrawal phase is limited access to academic resources due to low family economic status. Weak objectified cultural capital was a common factor among students in rural and urban areas. These findings are consistent with Bourdieu's framework, which asserts that family networks can provide resources that enhance educational outcomes, but the availability and effectiveness of this support are strongly influenced by economic status (Bourdieu, 1986). Similarly, in the Philippine context, Pagulayan et al (2021) found that students with low economic and cultural capital are less prepared for university, highlighting a global pattern in the link between economic resources, cultural capital, and dropout risk.

Recommendations and suggestions

Based on the study's findings, the researchers recommend the following:

- Launch guidance programs specifically designed for preparatory year students with limited cultural capital, focusing on essential academic skills such as English language, academic writing, and time management.
- Implement career guidance policies at the high school level as a preventive measure to reduce poor major choices that may lead to university dropout.
- Develop community initiatives to raise family awareness, particularly in rural areas, about the importance of academic culture and the family's role in supporting university students academically, culturally, and psychologically.
- Establish student support programs where senior students guide new students—especially those from similar cultural backgrounds—on improving peer interaction and social integration.
- Develop educational policies that ensure flexibility in choosing a major and provide effective institutional guidance to reduce university dropout among Saudi students.
- Organize mandatory training courses for faculty members on the negative impact of symbolic violence on university dropout among preparatory year students.
- Design student support programs targeted at preparatory year students with limited cultural and economic capital to facilitate access to academic resources.

The researchers also suggest conducting further research on the following:

- Cultural capital among general education students.
- Symbolic violence in schools and universities.
- Quantitative studies measuring cultural capital and symbolic violence.
- The experiences of students from rural and suburban areas in major universities.

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Figure (1): Study Model of the Relationship between Cultural Capital and Phases of University Dropout among Students within the Saudi Context

