

ORIGINAL

Institutional Strategies to Improve Postgraduate Graduation Rates: The Case of the MBA at UES21

Estrategias institucionales para mejorar la tasa de graduación en posgrados: Estudio de caso MAE UES21

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: postgraduate programs face a growing demand for accountability, where graduation rate becomes a key quality indicator. This study explores strategies to increase the graduation rate in the MBA program at UES21.

Method: a mixed-method design was applied, combining a descriptive cross-sectional analysis of the 2018 cohort graduation rate with surveys and interviews of students and faculty.

Results: only 8,58 % of students graduated within the expected timeframe. Main barriers identified include difficulties in academic writing, weak theoretical frameworks, and low engagement with thesis advisors.

Conclusions: institutional actions such as mentorship programs, writing workshops, and flexible assessment criteria are recommended to improve graduation outcomes.

Keywords: Graduation Rate; Postgraduate Education; Thesis Completion; Educational Strategies; Academic Writing.

RESUMEN

Introducción: los programas de posgrado enfrentan una creciente demanda de calidad, donde la tasa de graduación se convierte en un indicador clave. Este estudio analiza estrategias para mejorar la tasa de graduación en la Maestría en Administración de Empresas (MAE) de la Universidad Siglo 21.

Método: se utilizó un diseño mixto, con un análisis descriptivo transversal de la cohorte 2018, encuestas a estudiantes y entrevistas a docentes y egresados.

Resultados: solo el 8,58 % de los estudiantes se graduó en tiempo y forma. Se identificaron barreras como dificultades de redacción académica, escaso desarrollo del marco teórico y baja interacción con los tutores.

Conclusiones: se recomienda implementar talleres de escritura, tutorías activas y flexibilización en los criterios de evaluación para aumentar la tasa de egreso.

Palabras clave: Tasa de Graduación; Educación de Posgrado; Tesis; Estrategias Educativas; Escritura Académica.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, university systems have undergone a sustained process of expansion and diversification, driven both by policies to democratize access and by the growing demand for advanced training in globalized

labor markets. This quantitative growth has brought with it new demands for quality, among which increasing graduation rates stand out as a central objective for higher education institutions. Timely graduation—that is, the completion of studies within the time frame established by the curriculum—has become a key indicator of institutional effectiveness and the suitability of programs to students' trajectories.⁽¹⁾

In the postgraduate sphere, these trends are particularly evident in professional programs such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA), where the timely completion of the degree not only reflects academic quality but also the institutional capacity to support adult students with multiple work and family responsibilities in demanding educational processes. However, various studies agree that graduation rates in postgraduate programs in Latin America remain low and represent a structural challenge for the region's education systems.^(2,3,4)

In Argentina, the situation is particularly worrying: the most recent reports on the higher education system indicate that the country has one of the lowest tertiary graduation rates in Latin America, ranging between 24 % and 27 %, while dropout rates reach 73 %.⁽⁴⁾ In the specific case of postgraduate programs, Linares and Suoni⁽³⁾ documented that, in the MBA program at the National University of Cuyo, between 1994 and 2019, the graduation rate did not exceed 10 %, evidencing the persistence of this phenomenon over time. These data are part of a regional context where systematic reviews on the subject, such as that carried out by Ramírez Heredia and Carcausto-Calla⁽²⁾, have identified common patterns of dropout linked to academic factors (performance and curricular progress), individual variables (motivation, self-efficacy), and economic factors (availability of financing and workload).

Internationally, recent research offers complementary perspectives that help to understand the complexity of this phenomenon. Muthukrishnan et al.⁽⁵⁾, using a PLS-SEM model, demonstrated that research skills, student self-management, and institutional support are the most relevant determinants of timely graduation from graduate programs. In line with these findings, Valencia Quecano et al.⁽¹⁾, in a global review, pointed out that the quality of academic tutoring and personal motivation play a decisive role in student retention and completion. Particularly in the context of virtual education, a modality that has expanded considerably in recent years, it has been observed that student persistence is affected by psychosocial, motivational, and organizational factors, as indicated by Aparicio et al.⁽⁶⁾, who emphasize the importance of designing specific support strategies for this type of educational environment.

On the other hand, it is important to consider how economic conditions impact students' trajectories. Finamor⁽⁷⁾, in a study conducted in Brazil, showed that economic crises and fluctuations in the labor market significantly influence graduation times, causing delays and increasing dropout rates. These findings reinforce the need to adopt a comprehensive approach that considers not only academic and institutional aspects, but also the social and economic dynamics that affect the lives of graduate students.

This study arises from a specific problem detected in the 2018 cohort of the online Master's in Business Administration program at Siglo 21 University, where it was observed that only 8,58 % of students managed to complete their studies within the time frame stipulated by the curriculum. This data, far from being an isolated case, is part of the general trend described above and coincides with the difficulties identified in national and regional studies. Based on this diagnosis, this research aimed to describe, identify, and analyze the factors that influence effective graduation in this particular context, with the goal of generating inputs for the design of institutional strategies aimed at improving the graduation rate.⁽⁸⁾

The analysis focused on the Final Graduation Project (TFG), a stage of the academic career where the greatest difficulties tend to be concentrated, both from an academic and organizational point of view. Recent literature has highlighted that this is a critical moment in the transition of graduate students and that institutional intervention at this stage can have a significant impact on improving timely graduation.⁽⁵⁾ To address this issue, a mixed methodological approach was adopted, combining surveys of students in the aforementioned cohort, in-depth interviews with graduates and faculty, and analysis of institutional documents.

This study seeks to contribute to the design of concrete actions that strengthen academic support processes, promote the review of current regulations, enhance the training of specialized tutors, and develop the skills required for the preparation of the TFG, in line with the best practices identified in the national and international literature. In this way, it aims to contribute to a comprehensive strategy that favors a sustained increase in timely graduation rates in postgraduate programs and, in particular, in online MBA programs.

METHOD

Type of study, location, and period

A mixed descriptive study was conducted with a sequential and complementary design (quantitative-qualitative). The case analyzed corresponds to the Master's Degree in Business Administration (online) at Siglo 21 University, Córdoba, Argentina. The analysis period focused on the 2018 cohort, and data collection was carried out until November 2022.

Population, sample, and sampling technique

The population consisted of the 478 students enrolled in the 2018 cohort. A total of 214 students (44,77 %) responded to the survey. For the in-depth interviews, a purposive sample of 15 students from the same cohort and 10 teachers with experience in TFG supervision was selected.

Instruments and variables (scales/dimensions)

The study is based on observational methods (survey, interviews, and document analysis).

- Structured survey with closed questions, organized into four areas/dimensions: Academic writing and writing skills, access, guidance and monitoring by the TFG supervisor, motivation, organization and self-management, personal circumstances.
- Semi-structured interviews with students and teachers to explore meanings, experiences, and recommendations regarding the TFG process.
- Documentary analysis of internal institutional sources to define the universe and contextualize the graduation rate.

Data collection and storage procedure

Data collection was carried out in three stages: (1) analysis of institutional documentation to define the universe; (2) online administration of the survey to the 2018 cohort; (3) semi-structured interviews with students and teachers.

Storage: [complete: platform used, anonymization/encoding of responses, storage on a secure server, retention period, responsible parties, etc.]

Statistical and qualitative analysis

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies). Qualitative data were organized and coded into emerging thematic categories, following content analysis criteria.

RESULTS

The analysis of the 2018 cohort of the online Master's Degree in Business Administration showed that, at the time of data collection (November 2022), only 41 students had completed their final thesis and obtained their degree, representing 8,58 % of the total number of enrolled students ($n=478$). This figure is significantly below the desirable parameters established by both the institution and external evaluation frameworks.

Regarding the results obtained from the survey, the following findings stand out, organized by dimension:

Academic writing and writing skills

Sixty percent of respondents reported having difficulties with academic writing during the preparation of their TFG. This difficulty was mainly manifested in the construction of the theoretical framework, the articulation of their own ideas with bibliographic sources, and the formal and coherent expression of academic thought. Most students reported that they had not received sufficient training in scientific writing techniques and considered the institutional resources available to support this stage of the process to be insufficient.

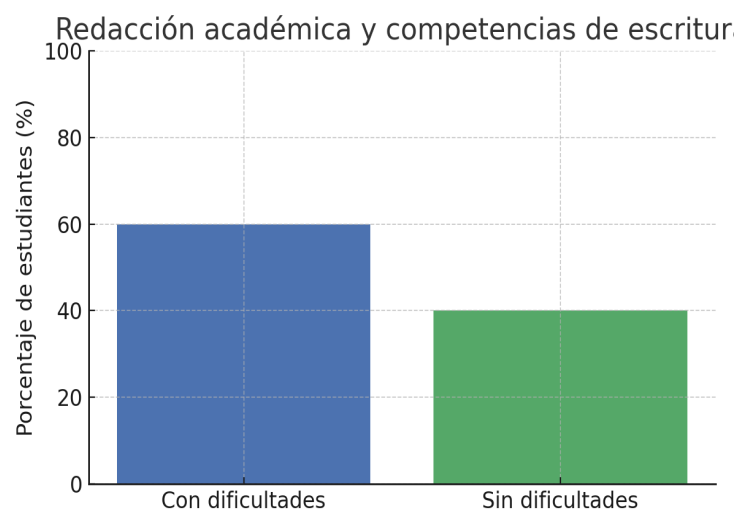


Figure 1. Academic writing and writing skills

Relationship with the TFG supervisor

Forty percent of students reported that the guidance received from their TFG supervisor or tutor was insufficient. The responses indicate intermittent availability, delayed responses, and limited personalized follow-up. In several cases, it was mentioned that tutors were assigned late or that there were changes in supervisors during the process. These situations led to demotivation, methodological uncertainty, and delays in submitting progress reports.

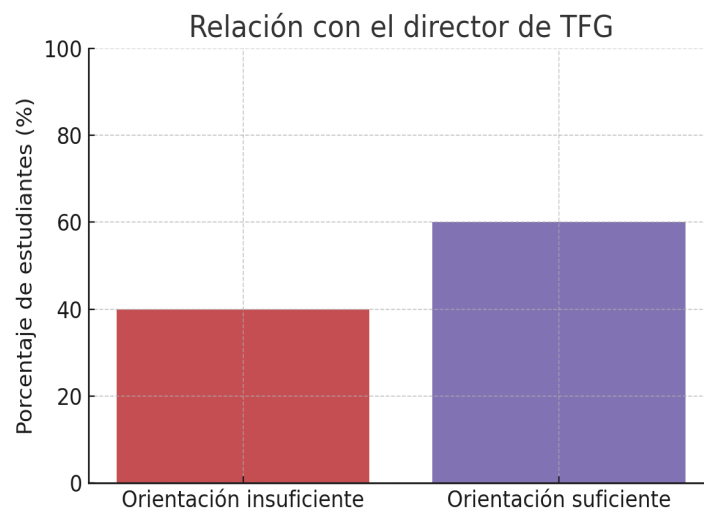


Figure 2. Relationship with the TFG director

Motivation, organization, and self-management

Twenty percent of respondents reported experiencing moments of demotivation or writer's block while writing their TFG. Among the reasons mentioned were work overload, stress derived from professional and family demands, and a feeling of isolation in the final stage of their academic career. Despite valuing the virtual modality and its flexibility, students also pointed out that this modality requires a high degree of autonomy and organization that not everyone can maintain without support.

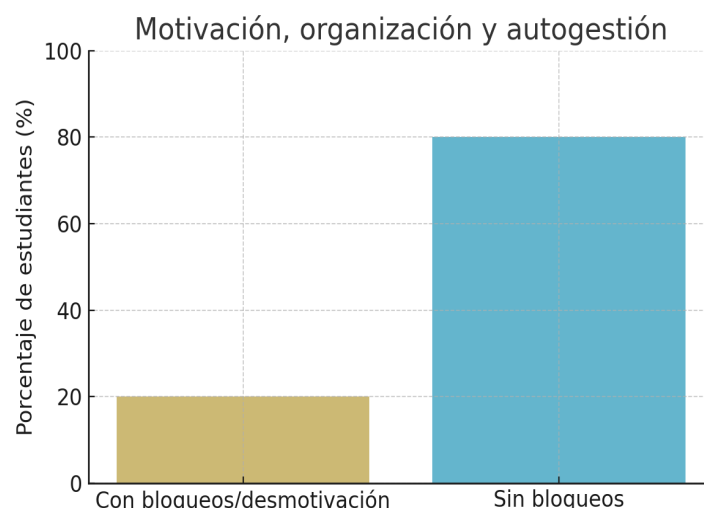


Figure 3. Motivation, organization, and self-management

Personal circumstances

Thirty percent of respondents indicated that they had experienced personal situations that affected the continuity of their studies, including health problems, deaths in the family, moving, births, and job loss. Although these situations are not directly related to the institutional design of the graduate program, they do affect the pace of study and require flexible arrangements to maintain progress.

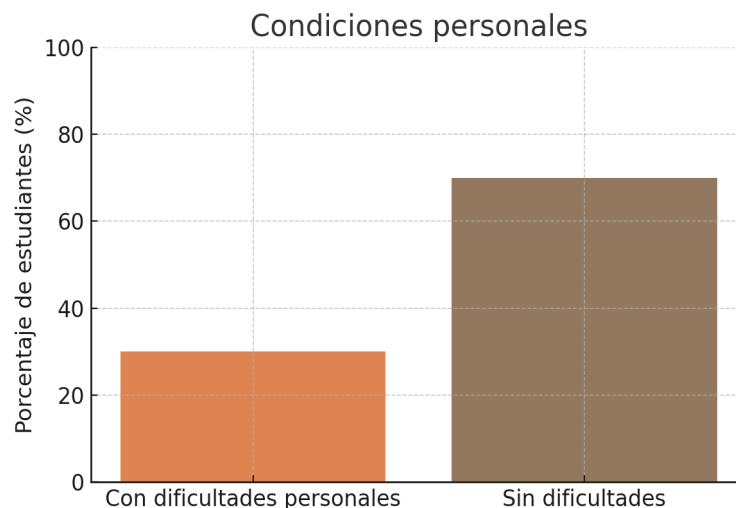


Figure 4. Personal conditions

The interviews with students provided further insight into their perceptions and experiences of the process of completing the postgraduate program. Several interviewees pointed out that the most difficult moment was the beginning of the TFG: problematizing, defining the object of study, and deciding on the methodology. There was also evidence of a disconnect between the content of the courses in the curriculum and the methodological requirements for the final project. In this regard, some students mentioned that the thesis workshops offered were too general or lacked context.

Regarding the role of the tutor or supervisor, the testimonies agree that the availability, clarity, and ability of the teacher to provide support have a direct impact on the possibility of progress. The cases in which a good relationship with the tutor was achieved coincided with smoother trajectories. On the contrary, students who reported abandonment, absence, or lack of guidance had more fragmented or truncated trajectories.

Interviews with teachers allowed us to reconstruct their perceptions of the role they play and the institutional conditions in which they do so. In general, teachers pointed to the lack of specific training for the role of tutor, the excessive workload in other subjects, and the absence of a clear protocol for supporting the TFG. Several teachers also emphasized that tutoring involves personalized follow-up that requires institutional recognition, allocated time, and opportunities for ongoing training.

Finally, among the proposals that emerged from the three instruments used, the following stand out: the implementation of specific academic writing workshops aimed at the preparation of the TFG; the design of a monitoring and early warning system for students who are falling behind; the improvement of the tutor assignment process; and the strengthening of institutional communication regarding the requirements and stages of the final project.

DISCUSSION

The deficits in scientific writing described by students replicate a widely documented pattern. In Brazil, Dall'Igna and Moritz⁽⁹⁾ found that only half of postgraduate programs offer formal training in writing, creating gaps similar to those detected in our case. Hodges et al.⁽¹⁰⁾ show that Latin American postgraduate students negotiate their writing between functional concerns and a lack of communicative scaffolding, which impacts the integration of sources and argumentative coherence.

The quality and frequency of tutorial follow-up appear to be decisive factors in multiple contexts. Valencia Quecano et al. highlight the decisive role of tutoring and personal motivation in retention and completion. In the region, Linares and Suoni show that, even with formal MBA structures, graduation rates remain below 10 %, demonstrating that the mere existence of a director does not guarantee graduation if criteria and response times are not institutionalized.

The literature on online education highlights that persistence is affected by motivational and organizational variables specific to the virtual environment. Aparicio et al. point to the need for specific support strategies for these formats. Muthukrishnan et al., using a PLS-SEM model, confirm that student self-management and institutional support are determinants of timely graduation.

Beyond academic factors, economic crises and labor fluctuations influence graduation times. Finamor demonstrates this impact in Brazil, reinforcing the need for flexible policies that take into account personal and market contingencies. Regional reviews (Ramírez Heredia and Carcausto-Calla) integrate these economic dimensions along with academic and motivational variables.

The low graduation rate in Latin American graduate programs is not due to a single cause: research points to a complex web of academic, institutional, and personal factors. This complex perspective has already been highlighted by studies that place the phenomenon within persistent regional trends.

In light of these similarities and differences, institutions should: (a) integrate writing training throughout the entire program, not just at the end; (b) formalize mentoring protocols with clear timelines and responsibilities; (c) design specific support for online learning that addresses motivation and organization; and (d) develop flexible mechanisms to address socioeconomic contingencies. These lines are aligned with the recommendations emerging from the international and regional literature mentioned above.

Limitations, strengths, and recommendations

This study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal relationships and limits the observation of changes over time. Second, the survey was based on self-reporting and had a response rate of 44,7 %, which may introduce self-selection and social desirability biases. Furthermore, the qualitative sample was intentional and limited (students and teachers from a single cohort), so the perceptions gathered do not necessarily represent the entire postgraduate program or other programs. Finally, objective performance indicators (e.g., exact times for each stage of the TFG or partial grades) were not included, nor were advanced inferential statistical techniques applied to model predictors of graduation.

Among the study's contributions, the mixed approach that combined descriptive quantitative analysis with in-depth interviews stands out, allowing for the triangulation of trends and meanings. The focus on a complete cohort of a virtual graduate program provides contextual specificity that is poorly documented in the region. In addition, the organization by dimensions (writing, tutoring, self-management, and personal conditions) facilitated a comprehensive and operational diagnosis for academic management. This multicausal reading dialogues with international and regional literature, but adds evidence situated in a Latin American distance education environment.

Based on the findings and comparative literature, three lines of action are suggested:

- Institutional policies: incorporate academic writing training from the beginning of the curriculum; standardize tutoring protocols (frequency, response times, and interim evaluation criteria); and design specific support mechanisms for the virtual modality (social-emotional support, time management, communities of practice).
- Academic and technological management: implement TFG monitoring systems with milestones and alerts (institutional dashboard), as well as accessible repositories and guides on regulations and examples of work.
- Future research: conduct longitudinal studies to observe complete trajectories; expand the sample to other cohorts and programs; incorporate inferential analysis or predictive models; and explore the impact of socioeconomic and employment variables with objective measures.

CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained allow us to affirm that the low graduation rate in the online Master's Degree in Business Administration is not due to a single cause, but rather to a set of interrelated factors that include pedagogical, organizational, and personal dimensions.

Among the main conclusions, the following stand out: a) the need to strengthen academic writing skills throughout the training program and not only in the final stage. The progressive development of argumentation skills, the use of sources, and written expression should be cross-cutting throughout the curriculum; b) the tutorial function in the TFG process requires greater institutionalization, clear assignment criteria, follow-up protocols, and specific training for the teachers who assume this role. Sustained pedagogical support promotes motivation, methodological clarity, and completion of the work; c) the design of institutional strategies to address personal circumstances that affect continuity, such as health issues, bereavement, or work overload, is essential to guarantee the right to graduate in diverse contexts; and d) although the virtual modality is valued for its flexibility, it must be accompanied by support mechanisms, active monitoring, and proposals that foster a sense of academic community.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Mariana Frandino.

Data curation: Laura Bustamante.

Formal analysis: Mariana Frandino.

Research: Laura Bustamante and Mariana Frandino.

Methodology: Laura Bustamante.

Project management: Mariana Frandino.