

# Perceived Factors Influencing Students to Drop Out of a Post-Graduate Programme

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**Abstract:** Some post-graduate students of Agricultural Education enrolled in Master's degree programmes in Eswatini do not graduate. Unfortunately, no study has been conducted on the factors contributing to the dropout rates among these graduate students. Therefore, this study sought to determine the perceived factors that influence post-graduate students to leave the programme. The study utilised a survey design, collecting data from post-graduate master's students from 1997 to 2024. A questionnaire was developed for the study and validated by three members of the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension. The reliability coefficient was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.84. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. The findings indicated that the factors influencing post-graduate students to drop out include dispositional, academic, institutional, and situational factors. It was concluded that the decision of post-graduate students to drop out is primarily influenced by institutional and academic factors. It is recommended that the Institute of Post-Graduate Studies at the University and the Department of Agricultural Education develop policies that are favourable to post-graduate students, such as creating schedules that accommodate working students.

**Keywords:** Agriculture education, drop-out, factors, factor analysis, Masters programme, post-graduate students.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the nature and quality of post-graduate studies in higher education have become matters of increasing interest and concern. There has been a shift towards a 'post-industrial' knowledge and information-based economy, which has meant an increasing emphasis on educational credentials and the formation of a multi-skilled, flexible, 'informed' workforce and citizenry (Franklin et al., 2021). The push for change results from continuous pressure on educational systems from stakeholders such as students, parents, and employers alike. Additionally, there has been rapid growth in demand for access to education at all levels, particularly for post-graduate education. Post-graduate education is a programme designed to teach individuals how to conduct research according to their interests, building on their undergraduate education, and to develop scholars (House, 2020).

Graduate studies, also known as post-graduate studies, are a form of professional development initiative (Madonsela, 2014). Post-graduate degrees are offered by university departments through the Institute of Post-Graduate Studies or a College of Post-Graduate Studies. A graduate study is a formal course of study that individuals pursue after receiving a bachelor's degree. Students enrol in graduate studies to earn a degree higher than a bachelor's. It is a continuation of their major area of interest from their undergraduate studies. Graduate studies differ significantly from undergraduate courses, as class sizes are generally smaller. In post-graduate courses, papers tend to replace examinations, and students no longer take frequent quizzes. Students are expected to participate in

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class discussions and must assume much of the responsibility for their own learning (College and University, 2016).

From the institutional perspective, post-graduate programmes aim to produce scholars, teachers, and researchers who actively contribute knowledge through research, analysis, and critique. Conversely, individuals' or consumers' perspectives on post-graduate programmes suggest that students may enrol for various reasons, such as personal factors, curriculum changes, technological advancements, influences from relatives, friends, and significant others, global competitiveness, acquiring new skills and competencies, societal changes, and financial reasons (Curtin University, 2024). House (2020) also stated that post-graduate education and training programmes produce researchers who are productive, responsive to the country's problems, and highly creative. A successful and qualified post-graduate is crucial for both underdeveloped and developing countries to enhance their skilled workforce. Post-graduate studies can include master's degrees, doctorate degrees, and post-doctorate degrees. Generally, post-graduate programmes are offered as research-based only, particularly for doctorate and post-doctorate programmes. However, post-graduate programmes are also available as coursework-only or as coursework and research programmes, especially for master's programmes (College and University, 2016; Learn, 2016).

Graduate students typically face numerous challenges, including the delivery system, flexibility or lack of flexibility in the programme, research at the master's level, technical issues, financial assistance, focus on the graduate programme, admission standards for graduate school, graduate credit for in-service work, and the need for professional experience before advancing in their graduate studies (Darawsheh, 2018). Similarly, Vilakati (2019) pointed out that sponsorship, the availability of library resources, and access to electronic devices are challenges for post-graduate students.

### **1.1 Problem statement**

The introduction of master's programmes in a university is to fulfil its chief mandate to produce manpower that aims to contribute to national development in the country (University of Eswatini, 2022). However, some post-graduate students of Agricultural Education enrolled for a master's degree in Eswatini do not graduate from their programmes. Unfortunately, there is no study that has been conducted on the factors that contribute to the dropping out of graduate students from the programme. According to Vilakati (2019), students at tertiary level are susceptible to a myriad of problems, and their severity cannot be over-emphasised. Vilakati further reported that this is shown by the number of withdrawals per academic year, yet every institution wishes to retain the same number of students it started with in that academic year. This has necessitated the need to identify the factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out of the university.

### **1.2 Objectives and hypotheses of the study**

The objectives of the study were to:

- Describe the demographic characteristics and background information of the respondents.
- Identify the perceived factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out of Agricultural Education at university.
- Determine the differences among the perceived factors influencing post-graduate students in Agricultural Education to drop out based on their demographic characteristics and background information.

The hypotheses are:

- H0: No relationship exists between age, number of dependants, programme status and proximity to the University, and the factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out.

- HA: A relationship exists between age, number of dependants, programme status and proximity to the University, and the factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The study was framed using Tinto's (1975) Model of Institutional Departure, which explains the factors influencing a student's decision to persist or drop out of an academic programme. In other words, it elucidates the involvement of students in the academic community and their level of engagement, which impacts their decision to continue or withdraw. Three pre-entry attributes affect the goals or commitments of students in pursuing their academic programmes: family background (such as status, education, and occupation), individual attributes (such as learning styles, sex, interests, and age), and pre-college schooling (such as subjects). As students seek to pursue the programme, they must commit to both the academic and social systems of the institution. The level of commitment and engagement will significantly influence their integration into both the academic and social systems of the learning institution, thereby impacting their commitment to their goals and to the institution itself. Consequently, a student may end up dropping out of the programme if the academic or social systems are unfavourable (see Figure 1). The researchers integrated Tinto's model with propositions from Cross (1981) and Potter and Alderman (1992). Cross identified three obstacles to adult learning that are also applicable to postgraduate students at the university: situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers. Potter and Alderman added the academic barrier to the three barriers reported by Cross (1981)

It can be observed that these barriers are integral components of Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (1975). The academic barrier aligns with the academic system of the model, while the institutional barrier can be directly linked to the institutional system. The dispositional and situational barriers are connected to both the academic and social systems, as discussed. However, these barriers may also align with external factors that are neither academic nor institutional in nature (Tinto, 2010). For instance, dispositional factors may include feelings of inferiority, such as low self-esteem, being comparatively over-age, experiencing exertion and overburden, poor health, lack of simplicity, and incompetence in communication skills, while situational barriers may include the influence of the workplace, age, and the financial status of the student.

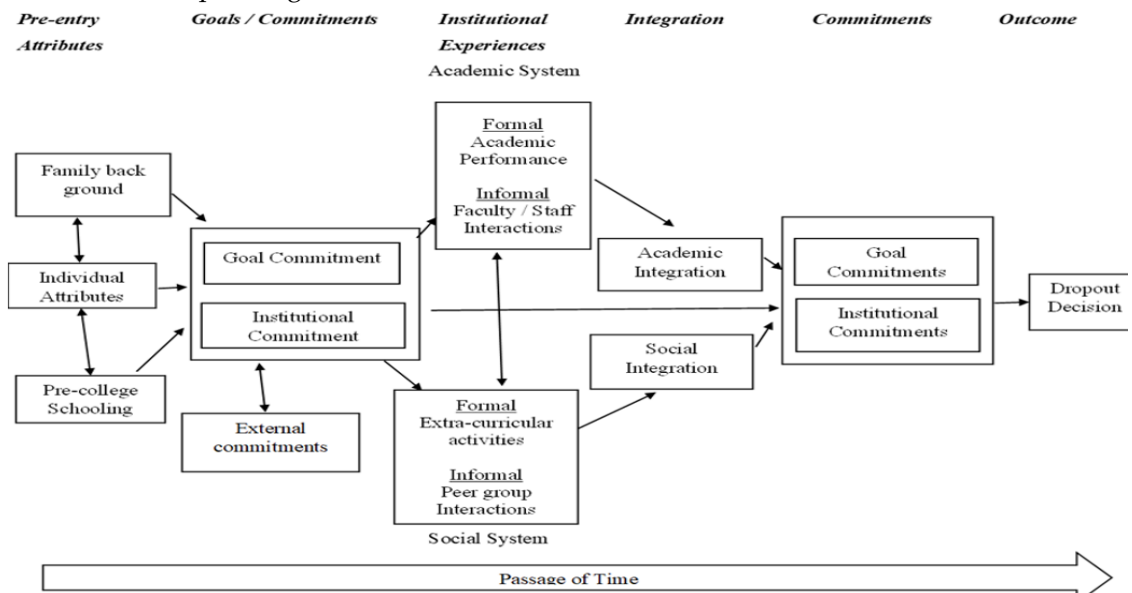


Figure 1: Institutional Departure by Tinto (1975)

The academic factors are related to elements crucial to the process of teaching and learning. They include challenges in oral and written expression, computer-related skills, critical and reflective skills, examinations, and tests (Nampila, 2021). Academic factors can be classified as formal or informal. Formal factors relate to academic (grade) performance, while informal factors pertain to interactions with faculty or staff (Himmel, 2018). The academic potential of a student may influence both their intellectual development and their integration into their studies. Incongruence in academic factors could lead to students dropping out of the master's programme.

Institutional factors consist of limitations regarding the methods institutions use to design, deliver, and administer learning activities. The variables of "quality teaching" and "experiences of students in the classroom" play a crucial role in the institutional factors influencing students' decisions to drop out. According to Viale (2014), institutional factors can be categorised into formal and informal. Formal factors include extracurricular activities such as sports, while informal factors relate to peer group interactions. The types of institutional characteristics that influence students' decisions to drop out include student composition, resources, structural characteristics, and processes and practices. Once again, incongruence in institutional factors could lead to students dropping out of the master's programme.

Situational factors are related to circumstantial settings that hinder adult learners' capability to learn (Lorenzo, 2021). Situational challenges arise from one's situation or environment at a given time. They comprise personal factors and are related to various tasks and activities at a personal level, such as family, children, and domestic responsibilities. Yasmin et al. (2018) found that postgraduate students are confronted with three challenges as they pursue their programme: financial, family, and time management challenges. Finally, dispositional factors, also known as attitudinal factors, relate to learners' feelings and perceptions of their capabilities to complete learning activities. Dispositional barriers take into account inferiority complexes such as low self-esteem, being comparatively over-age, exhaustion, overburden, poor health, inadequacy, and incompetence in communication skills (Alvarez, 2021). Dispositional factors are viewed as the attitudes and behaviours of students through a particular concept called student engagement.

Several theories have been developed in recent years, suggesting that dropping out of school is merely the final stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement (Newmann et al., 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989) or withdrawal (Finn, 1989) from school. Although there are some differences among these theories, they all suggest that there are two dimensions to engagement: academic engagement, or engagement in learning, and social engagement, or engagement in the social dimensions of schooling. Engagement is reflected in students' attitudes and behaviours concerning both the formal aspects of school (e.g., classrooms and school activities) and the informal (e.g., peer and adult relationships). Both dimensions of engagement can influence the decision to withdraw from school. The model aligns well with this study as it seeks to establish factors that influence postgraduate students to drop out of the programme. Understanding the factors that influence postgraduate students will enhance institutions' efforts to retain them until they graduate from their programmes of study.

### **3. Methodology**

The study was a quantitative study employing a descriptive survey design. The population of the study was all Master's post-graduate students who registered for programmes offered by the Department of Agricultural Education in one university in Eswatini between 1993 and 2024 (N=71). Out of the 71 students, one was deceased, and three were untraceable because they had changed contacts. All the accessible population (n=67) were used as the respondents in the study. The researcher developed a questionnaire from an interview with post-graduate students regarding the

factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out of the post-graduate programme. The questionnaire also consisted of closed-ended questions developed through literature. The questionnaire comprised five sections. Section A contained items relating to dispositional factors influencing post-graduate students to drop out of their programmes of study. Section B contained items relating to institutional factors influencing post-graduate students to drop out of their programmes of study. Section C contained items relating to academic factors influencing post-graduate students to drop out of their programmes of study. Section D contained items relating to situational factors influencing post-graduate students to drop out. Lastly, Section E consisted of the demographic characteristics and background information of post-graduate students. For the first four sections, a six-point Likert-type scale was provided for the respondents' ratings. The following rating scale was as follows: 1=strongly disagree, 2=slightly disagree, 3=disagree, 4=slightly agree, 5=agree, 6=strongly agree. The Likert-type scale was preferred over the traditional Likert scale, as it is ideal for further data analysis involving advanced statistics, such as Factor Analysis.

Letters seeking permission to conduct the study were addressed to the Head of the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension at the university, school principals, and the respondents. Participants were asked to complete and sign a Consent Form. Copies of the questionnaires were hand-delivered by the researchers to the agriculture teachers, who were given a fortnight to complete them. To ensure confidentiality, the questionnaire was designed to conceal respondents' names.

The questionnaire was compiled into a booklet format, with an image on the front page to enhance face validity. Content validity was established by three lecturers in the Agricultural Education Department at the university. The reliability of the instrument was assessed by piloting it with 30 post-graduate students in the Agribusiness and Economics Management department who were not part of the study. The reliability coefficient was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, with coefficients for the domains ranging from 0.76 to 0.94 and an overall reliability coefficient of 0.84, indicating 84% reliability for the instrument. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. After entering the data into SPSS, frequencies were run to check for accuracy. The following statistics were employed for data analysis: frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation, t-test, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and factor analysis.

#### **4. Presentation of Results**

The presentation of the findings was guided by the objectives of the study.

##### **4.1 Demographic Characteristics and background information of the respondents**

Respondents were requested to provide information on their demographic characteristics and background information on the following variables: status on the programme, type of enrolment in the programme, gender, marital status, job status, spouse's working status, financial support, number of dependants, proximity to the university, and age. Table 1 presents the distribution of demographic characteristics and background information of the Master's graduates in Agricultural Education at the University.

The findings of the study reveal that 53 respondents (79.1%) had completed their master's degree, while 16 respondents (20.9%) were still ongoing students in the programme. Almost all the respondents were enrolled part-time in the programme (n=66, 98.5%), with only one respondent (1.5%) enrolled full-time. Most respondents were self-sponsored, paying tuition using loans (n=44, 65.7%). The postgraduate students at the institution were predominantly Agriculture teachers (n=35, 52.2%). The population studied was largely male, with 65.7% of the respondents identifying as male and 34.3% as female. In terms of age, most respondents were between 30 and 39 years old (37.3%), and the second largest group was between 40 and 49 years old (35.8%). On average, the postgraduate students had six dependants. One respondent had 16 dependants, which may contribute to their

financial burden. Additionally, on average, respondents lived 15.24 kilometres from the university, with one student residing 46 km away from the institution.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics and background information of the respondents(n=67)**

Characteristics	F	%
<b>Status in the programme</b>		
Completed	53	79.1
Ongoing	14	20.9
<b>Programme attendance</b>		
Full-time	1	1.5
Part-time	66	98.5
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	44	65.7
Female	23	34.3
<b>Age Categories</b>		
20-29	3	4.5
30-39	10	14.9
40-49	25	37.3
50-59	24	35.8
60-69	5	7.5
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	44	65.7
Living together	2	3.0
Windowed/separated/Divorced	4	6.0
Single	17	25.4
<b>Job status</b>		
Agriculture teacher	35	50.2
Class teacher	6	9
Head of department	13	19.4
Inspector	1	1.5
Deputy head teacher	2	3
Head teacher	5	7.5
Other	5	7.5
<b>Spouse/partner working</b>		
Yes full time	34	50.7
Yes part-time	5	7.5
No	6	9
Not applicable	22	32.8
<b>Financial support</b>		
Loans	44	65.7
Personal earnings	22	32.8
Scholarship	1	1.5
<b>Number of dependents</b>		
Mean	5.24	
SD	3.37	
(Minimum=0, Maximum=16)		
<b>10. Proximity to the University (Distance away from respondent's residence)</b>		
Mean	16.25	
SD	11.21	

Characteristics	F	%
Maximum=1, Maximum=46		

## 4.2 Factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out of the programme

The findings of the study reveal that the most influential perceived factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out are institutional factors ( $r = .788$ ) (Table 2), followed by academic factors ( $r = .785$ ) (Table 3). The least influential perceived factor for post-graduate students to drop out was dispositional factors ( $r = .755$ ) (Table 4), followed by situational factors ( $r = .672$ ) (Table 5).

### 4.2.1 Institutional factors

Table 2 depicts that the most dominant institutional factors that have a very strong correlation (.70 to .99) to post-graduate students' decision to drop out of the programme include: unstable university calendar ( $r = .921$ ), rigid course schedules ( $r = .879$ ), departmental culture ( $r = .852$ ), expensive tuition fees ( $r = .850$ ), rusty study skills ( $r = .816$ ), unclear deadlines ( $r = .775$ ), and difficult tests ( $r = .796$ ). Lack of financial aid in the institution ( $r = .641$ ) and the awkward location of the campus for commuting ( $r = .581$ ) have a substantial correlation to post-graduate students' decision to drop out.

**Table 2:** Institutional factors that affect post-graduate students to drop out ( $n=67$ )

Institutional Factors	Component matrix
Unstable university calendar	0.921
Rigid course schedules	0.879
Departmental culture	0.852
Expensive tuition fee	0.850
Career support unavailability	0.801
Unclear deadlines	0.775
Lack of financial aid in the institution	0.641
Awkward location of the campus for commuting	0.581
Overall	0.788

### 4.3.2 Dispositional factors

Table 3 indicates that the dispositional factors strongly correlated with post-graduate students' decision to drop out of the University include: student's lack of confidence in themselves ( $r = .867$ ), the student's undergraduate perspective ( $r = .841$ ), rusty study skills ( $r = .816$ ), inability to realise their own ability ( $r = .805$ ), inability to fit in with other students ( $r = .779$ ), conflict arising from upward mobility ( $r = .714$ ), and inability to find time to study ( $r = .703$ ). There are also other dispositional factors with a substantial correlation to post-graduate students' decision to drop out of the university; these are: difficulty in understanding requirements associated with the completion of the programme ( $r = .698$ ) and being comparatively over-age ( $r = .563$ ).

**Table 3:** Dispositional factors influencing post-graduate students to drop out

Dispositional factors	Component Matrix
Student's lack of confidence	0.867
Students having a traditional (undergraduate) perspective	0.841
Rusty study skills	0.816
Inability to realise own ability	0.805
Inability to fit in with other students	0.779
Conflict arising from upward mobility	0.714
Inability to find time to study	0.703
Difficult to understand requirements associated with completion of the programme	0.698
Comparatively overage	0.563
Overall	0.755

### 4.2.3 Situational factors

Table 4 shows that certain situational factors have a strong correlation with post-graduate students' decisions to drop out of university. These factors include: supporting many dependents ( $r = .863$ ), proximity to the institution ( $r = .749$ ), having an unsupportive partner ( $r = .730$ ), and lack of family support ( $r = .726$ ). The table also shows that there are situational factors that have a substantial correlation with post-graduate students' decision to drop out of the university in Eswatini. These factors are: lack of transport money ( $r = .698$ ), family gender roles ( $r = .554$ ), reliance on public transport ( $r = .538$ ), and lack of learning materials ( $r = .517$ ).

**Table 4:** Situational factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out of the university

Situational factors	Component matrix
Supporting many dependents	0.863
Proximity to the institution	0.749
Having an unsupportive partner	0.730
Lack of family support	0.726
Lack of transport money	0.698
Family gender roles	0.554
Reliance on public transport	0.538
Lack of learning materials	0.517
Overall	0.672

### 4.2.5 Academic factors

Table 5 presents the academic (teaching and learning) factors that have an association with post-graduate students' decision to drop out from the university. These factors are: lack of educators' commitment to teaching them ( $r = .881$ ), lack of educators' interest in teaching them ( $r = .879$ ), difficult tests ( $r = .796$ ), and students' lack of computer skills ( $r = .583$ ).

**Table 5:** Academic factors that affect post-graduate students to drop out of the University

Academic Factors	Component matrix
Lack of educator's commitment to teaching them	0.881
Lack of educators' motivation to teach them	0.879
Difficult tests	0.796
Lack of computer skills	0.583
Overall	0.785

## 4.3 Differences among perceived Factors influencing post-graduate Students to drop out

Table 6 presents the differences among perceived factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out from the University by selected demographic characteristics and background information. An independent t-test was used to find out the differences in the factors that influence post-graduate students by sex and the programme status of the students. On the other hand, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to find out the differences in the factors that influence post-graduate students by financial source, marital status, and job status. The findings of the study revealed that there is no significant difference between all the factors and the demographic characteristics and background information except for institutional factors and the programme status of the post-graduate students ( $t = -2.02$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ).



**Table 6:** Differences among perceived factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out

Feedback Strategy	Sex		Programme Status		Financial Source		Marital Status		Job Status	
	t	p	t	p	F	P	F	p	F	p
Dispositional Factors	0.32	0.75	-0.58	0.56	2.82	0.06	1.01	0.39	1.16	0.34
Academic Factors	1.23	0.19	-0.41	0.68	2.11	0.12	1.24	0.30	0.99	0.43
Institutional Factors	0.39	0.70	-2.02	0.04*	0.80	0.45	1.44	0.23	1.96	0.85
Situational Factors	0.37	0.71	-0.47	0.63	1.218	0.30	0.34	0.79	1.53	0.18
p≤0.05										

The effect size was calculated using Cohen's formula in order to determine the practical difference (magnitude) between the completed and ongoing post-graduate students.

The formula for calculating effect size is as follows:  $d = \text{Mean}_1 - \text{Mean}_2 / \text{SD}_{\text{pooled}}$

Where:

$d$  = effect size

Mean 1 = mean of ongoing post-graduate students

Mean 2 = mean of completed post-graduate students

$\text{SD}_1^2$  = standard deviation for mean of ongoing post-graduate students

$\text{SD}_2^2$  = standard deviation for mean of completed post-graduate students

$\text{SD}_{\text{pooled}} = \sqrt{[(\text{SD}_1^2 + \text{SD}_2^2)/2]}$  = square root of the standard deviations divided by two.

$\text{SD}_{\text{pooled}} = \sqrt{[0.596^2 + 0.507^2]/2} = 0.600$

$d = [3.622 - 3.195]/0.600 = 0.712$

The higher the effect size: the greater the practical value on the magnitude between the ongoing and completed students on factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out from the university. According to Cohen (1988), a large effect size is one that has a value of  $d = 0.80$  and above; a medium effect size is between 0.50 and 0.79, while a small effect size has a  $d$  value of 0.49 and below. The findings of the study revealed a medium effect size ( $d = 0.712$ ). This implies that the difference between completed and ongoing post-graduate students on the factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out was medium. This implies that the programme status of the post-graduate student does influence continuing or dropping the programme.

Therefore, the research hypothesis of the study—that there is a significant difference between the factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out from the University based on the demographic characteristics and background information of the respondents—was confirmed. The null hypothesis—that there are no significant differences between the factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out from the University based on the demographic characteristics and background information of the respondents—was rejected. The decision on the hypothesis of the study was influenced by the statistically significant difference that existed between the institutional factors and the programme status of the post-graduate students.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study reveal that the most influential perceived factors that influence post-graduate students to drop out of the programme were institutional and academic factors. The findings confirm the proposition by the Model of Institutional Departure, as postulated by Tinto (1975), that academic and institutional factors influence students to drop out of a programme. Viale

(2014) also reported that institutions have an influence on the dropout of students from the programme, which is in line with the findings of the study.

As already noted from the findings, the most prominent institutional factors were: an unstable university calendar, rigid course schedules, departmental culture, expensive tuition fees, and unclear deadlines. The lack of financial aid in the institution and the awkward location of the campus for commuting were also reported among the factors influencing post-graduate students' decision to drop out of the programme. These findings are consistent with those by Tinto (2010), who reported that students drop out due to unfriendly institutional policies and practices and the characteristics of the institution, such as student composition and size, among others. Academic factors responsible for students dropping out from the programme were a lack of educators' commitment to teaching them, a lack of educators' interest in teaching, and difficult tests. These findings support Hector (2014), who stated that quality teaching and experiences of students in the classroom have a crucial role in students' decisions to drop out. Dispositional factors were also responsible for students dropping out from the programme. These factors included students lacking confidence, students' undergraduate perspective, rusty study skills, students unable to realise their own abilities, inability to fit in with other students, and fear of failure, among others. The findings concur with the literature by Lorenzo-Quiles et al. (2023), suggesting that dropping out of an institution is the final stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement. The disengagement is reflected in students' attitudes and behaviours with respect to both the formal aspects of school (e.g., classrooms and school activities) and the informal ones (e.g., peer and adult relationships). Even though the situational factors were the least influential in causing post-graduate students to drop out of the programme, it is worth pointing out that supporting many dependents, proximity to the institution, having an unsupportive partner, and lack of family support contribute to dropping out of the programme. The findings are in harmony with the assertion by Alvarez (2021) that situational factors are related to circumstantial settings that hinder learners' capability of learning.

Generally, the study reported no significant difference between the factors and demographic variables, except between the institutional factors and programme status of the post-graduate students. The findings concur with Shabangu (2019), who reported that whether the students are female or male, they are all equally influenced by the factors in completing the Master's degree. Shabangu further stated that this also indicates commitment from both sexes. Furthermore, the findings support Vilakati (2019), who found no statistically significant difference in the challenges faced by agriculture teachers pursuing post-graduate education based on their demographic characteristics, with a significant level. However, the findings differ from Yasmin et al. (2018), who reported differences in completion rates by gender (females had a higher completion rate). The findings also contradict Tinto (2010), who found that male students spend less time on academic activities, which seems to increase their dropout rate, whereas female students who drop out tend to exhibit more difficulties with social integration.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers concluded that the dropout process among post-graduate students is influenced by multiple factors: dispositional, academic, institutional, and situational. The most perceived influential factors were institutional and academic, while the least influential were situational factors. Specifically, the most influential institutional factors include an unstable university calendar, rigid course schedules, departmental culture, and expensive tuition fees. On the other hand, the most perceived influential academic factors are students' lack of confidence, a traditional (undergraduate) perspective, and rusty study skills. It can also be concluded that the perceived influential factors for post-graduate students dropping out of the master's programme are influenced by the students' status, whether they are ongoing or have completed their studies.

The study cannot claim to be without limitations. Three graduates were untraceable due to changes in contact information, and one is deceased. Consequently, only the accessible population was used for the study. Additionally, the study focused solely on students' responses regarding factors influencing post-graduate students to drop out, omitting the contributions of educators.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- Since the most influential factors perceived to be responsible for post-graduate students dropping out of the programme are institutional and academic, the Institution of Post-Graduate Studies, in collaboration with the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension, should address the concerns raised in the study. These include the commitment of academic staff to students, reconsideration of tuition fees and payment arrangements, flexibility to accommodate working students, and paying attention to issues that may destabilise the university calendar.
- The Institute of Post-Graduate Studies at the university should discuss post-graduate activity schedules to ensure they fit the needs of working students.
- Educators and post-graduate students should improve their modes of communication to enhance the teaching and learning process.
- Since this study was conducted with students in the Agricultural Education Post-Graduate programme, a similar study should be conducted to identify factors leading to dropouts among post-graduate students and should also involve other stakeholders, such as academic staff members.

## 7. Declarations

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualisation (T.W.D. & A.F.T.); Literature review (T.W.D. & A.F.T.); methodology (T.W.D. & A.F.T.); software (N/A.); validation (A.F.T.); formal analysis (T.W.D.); investigation (T.W.D.); data curation (T.W.D. & A.F.T.) drafting and preparation (T.W.D. & A.F.T.); review and editing (T.W.D. & A.F.T.); supervision (A.F.T.); project administration (T.W.D.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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