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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFL Students' Attrition: A Case of the University of Garmian in the Kurdistan Regional Government

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Abstract

Student attrition is a persistent challenge in higher education, and it can be especially acute in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program where language demands and social integration pressures compound typical academic barriers. Evidence from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq remains limited, leaving local institutions without targeted guidance on retention. The research aimed to identify main academic, personal, and institutional factors that influence students' decisions to withdraw, focusing on both attrited and non-attrited undergraduate EFL students. A mixed-methods approach was employed, which combined the quantitative data from a self-reported questionnaire that was administered to both groups and the qualitative information from semi-structured interviews with attrited students. Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 27) for descriptive and inferential statistics, while thematic content analysis was applied to interview responses. The results revealed that academic challenges, such as outdated teaching methods and limited faculty support, were important contributors to attrition. Personal factors, including financial difficulties and family responsibilities, also had an important role, alongside institutional shortcomings such as inefficient administrative processes and a lack of campus community. These findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of student attrition and provide practical information for institutions who want to improve student retention rates. Universities can create supportive environment that fosters student success and persistence by addressing both academic and non-academic challenges.

Keywords: *student attrition, student retention, integration challenges, student integration model", university drop-out" and academic and social integration*

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1. Introduction

Student attrition is a common challenge for higher education institutions across the globe and institutions continuously try to understand the multifaceted factors that contribute to students' decisions to withdraw from their programs before completion. In particular, attrition within EFL programs presents special challenges due to academic requirements, language barriers,

and problems related to cultural integration. These factors can highly affect student retention and make EFL programs more likely to have high dropout rates. Understanding the causes of student attrition in such contexts is important for developing effective strategies to enhance retention and improve educational outcomes.

This study investigates the causes of student attrition within the EFL program at the University of Garmian, in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq. The research aims to identify both academic and non-academic factors that contribute to undergraduate students' decisions to withdraw from the program. The study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the barriers that EFL students face by examining these factors, particularly in a regional context where socio-political and cultural factors may influence educational experiences.

This study is based on Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model, which emphasizes the role of academic and social integration in predicting student retention. According to Tinto, students who are unable to integrate into their academic environment or who face challenges in adapting to the social aspects of university life are more likely to drop out. The model suggests that both academic factors (such as teaching quality and workload) and social factors (such as relationships with peers and faculty) are important to students' decisions to stay in or leave a program. In the context of this study, Tinto's framework helps explore how EFL students at the University of Garmian experience integration challenges academically and socially, and how these challenges contribute to their decision to withdraw from the program. The study seeks to identify important factors that influence student attrition by applying this model and investigates the ways in which improving integration can potentially reduce dropout rates in EFL programs.

Despite the growing body of research on student attrition, few studies have specifically focused on EFL contexts, particularly in regions like Kurdistan, where socio-cultural and economic dynamics might contribute to students' academic experiences and retention. While research has shown general factors that contribute to student dropout, such as financial problem, academic stress, and lack of institutional support (Tinto, 1975; Bean, 1982), the unique challenges faced by EFL students such as language proficiency issues, cultural adaptation difficulties, and the pressures that are associated with learning a foreign language are often overlooked. These challenges are worsened by the complex socio-political environment in the KRG, which may influence students' ability to succeed in their studies and continue their academic programs. Thus, the main problem that is addressed by this study is the lack of detailed understanding regarding the specific factors that contribute to EFL student attrition at the University of Garmian. This knowledge gap leaves institutions without sufficient information about the specific barriers, which are faced by students in such contexts, and restricts the development of suitable strategies to address these challenges and reduce attrition.

This study is significant in several ways. First, it addresses an under-researched area by focusing specifically on EFL student attrition in the Kurdistan Regional Government, where

the educational context presents different socio-cultural and political dynamics. This research contributes to the broader body of knowledge on student attrition, particularly in less-explored educational contexts by identifying the unique challenges that are faced by EFL students in this region. Second, the study provides practical information that can inform institutional policies and interventions that are aimed at improving retention rates in EFL programs. For example, it may guide universities in designing better academic support systems, improving faculty training, and offering more comprehensive campus activities that encourage a sense of belonging among students. Third, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of attrition factors by adopting a mixed-methods approach, which combines quantitative data with qualitative information from students themselves. Finally, the findings of this study can be used to develop evidence-based strategies for reducing dropout rates in EFL programs at the University of Garmian and at other similar institutions that face similar challenges. This research aims to contribute to the development of a more supportive and effective learning environment for EFL students by improving our understanding of the causes of attrition, which can enhance both retention and academic success in the long term.

2. Literature Review

Student attrition in higher education has been a topic of extensive research, which led to the development of many theories and models that aimed at explaining why students decide to withdraw from their programs. One of the most widely recognized frameworks is Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model, which states that students' social and academic integration are important factors in their decision to remain in or withdraw from a university program. According to Tinto, students who fail to align with the academic and social communities or who are unable to meet academic expectations are more likely to leave their programs. This framework has been applied across different educational contexts, including EFL programs, where specific challenges such as language barriers and cultural adaptation are key factors influencing student retention (Duncan, 2024; Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022).

Duncan (2024) examined how faculty knowledge of SLA relates to professors' asset vs. deficit orientations toward international non-native English-speaking students. Using a Likert-type survey of 77 graduate-level instructors in the Seattle/Puget Sound area, Duncan reported a statistically significant positive correlation between SLA knowledge and an "asset" perspective (i.e., viewing multilingual learners' repertoires as resources rather than shortcomings). Although the study did not track retention outcomes, its implication for EFL programs is clear: faculty dispositions and pedagogical knowledge shape instructional climate and support, which in turn influence students' academic integration and persistence.

Second, Yılmaz and Temizkan (2022) analyzed how educational service quality and socio-cultural adaptation difficulties relate to international students' higher-education satisfaction at a large Turkish university (Karabük). Drawing on convenience-sample survey data from 413 students and estimating a structural equation model, they found that assurance and empathy

(service-quality dimensions) and specific adaptation variables (e.g., cultural differences, religious beliefs) were significantly associated with overall satisfaction. Because satisfaction is closely linked to engagement and persistence in integration/engagement frameworks, their results underscore the institutional levers, service quality, responsiveness, and culturally attuned support, that are most likely to influence students' trajectories in EFL settings.

In EFL settings, several academic, financial, and institutional factors have been identified to contribute to student attrition. Academic challenges are particularly common and heavy workloads, difficulties in language acquisition, and teaching quality are often reported as significant barriers to student success (Hammou, et al., 2024; Kormos & Csizer, 2014). EFL students often face the problem of mastering both a new language and the academic content, which can result in academic burnout and lead to withdrawal from the program. Furthermore, the quality of instruction is an important factor, as studies have shown that students who feel unsupported by their instructors or dissatisfied with teaching methods are more likely to drop out of their programs (Ettehad et al., 2023).

Financial difficulties are another important factor in student attrition, especially in regions where students face significant financial problems, such as tuition fees, textbooks, and living expenses. Research has shown that financial stress can have a serious effect on students' ability to persist in their education (Javadi Safa et al., 2022). Personal and family-related factors, such as the need to care for relatives or the pressure of working part-time jobs to support themselves, further complicate students' ability to balance academic and personal responsibilities, thus increasing the likelihood of attrition (Christo & Oyinlade, 2015).

Institutional factors also play a significant role in student retention. Inefficiencies in university administration, a lack of student support services, and a feeling of disconnection from the academic community can worsen attrition rates (Chen, 2012; Pusztai, 2019). Students who perceive that their university environment is unfriendly or fail to establish social connections with peers and faculty are at a higher risk of withdrawal (Mickens, 2021). Academic and personal Social support networks are important to student persistence and their absence can lead to disengagement and dropout.

Although existing research emphasizes the importance of these academic, financial, and institutional factors, there has been limited attention paid to the specific challenges that are faced by EFL students in contexts such as the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The socio-political and cultural dynamics in this region and the challenges of language acquisition may create additional problems for students who pursue an EFL program. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by exploring the unique challenges and barriers that are faced by EFL students at the University of Garmian. This research aims to provide a more detailed view of student attrition in EFL programs by understanding how academic, personal, and institutional factors interact in this context and contribute to strategies for improving student retention. The study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the reasons for undergraduate EFL students' attrition at the University of Garmian in the Kurdistan Regional Government?

RQ2: To what extent do the perceptions of factors contributing to student attrition differ between attrited and non-attrited EFL students at the University of Garmian?

RQ3: What are the recommendations provided by former EFL students who have withdrawn from the University of Garmian to reduce attrition rates?

H$_0$. There is no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of factors contributing to student attrition between attrited and non-attrited EFL students at the University of Garmian.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the factors that contribute to student attrition among EFL learners at the University of Garmian. The methodology includes administering a structured questionnaire to both attrited and non-attrited students and conducting semi-structured interviews with former students to gain deeper information about their experiences and perspectives.

3.1. Research Design

The mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon by combining the depth of qualitative data with the generalizability of quantitative data (Creswell, 2014). The mixed-methods design also facilitates triangulation and enables the validation of the findings through multiple data sources, and enhances the reliability of the results (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

3.2. Participants

The participants were undergraduate EFL students from the University of Garmian, comprising two distinct groups: students who had voluntarily withdrawn from their studies (attrited group) and those who remained enrolled (non-attrited group). A purposive sampling technique was employed as it effectively identifies individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach ensured the inclusion of 25 students from the attrited group, who had experience with the challenges that led to withdrawal, and 30 students from the non-attrited group, who were actively pursuing their studies. This sample size provided a strong basis for both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses and enhanced the generalizability of the findings (Cohen et al., 2017).

3.3. Instruments for Data Collection

This study used two main instruments for the data collection, namely a self-reported questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

3.3.1. Self-Reported Questionnaire

The questionnaire, adapted from Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model, was designed to measure factors contributing to student attrition across academic, personal, and institutional domains (see Appendix A). The questionnaire consisted of closed items that assessed the frequency of different factors such as dissatisfaction with teaching quality, lack of motivation, and financial difficulties. The questionnaire comprised 15 Likert-type items (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree) distributed across three subscales: Academic (5 items), Personal (5 items), and Institutional (5 items). It was piloted on a small group of participants to ensure its clarity, validity, and reliability. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with values interpreted based on Nunnally and Bernstein's (1978) guideline, which suggests that a reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered acceptable. The results indicated excellent reliability for all three components of the questionnaire: academic factors ($\alpha = .93$), personal factors ($\alpha = .92$), and institutional factors ($\alpha = .96$), which demonstrated that the items within each component were consistently measuring their respective constructs.

3.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews was conducted with 10 former EFL students who had withdrawn from the program (See Appendix B). The interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of the personal, social, and academic factors that influenced their decision to leave. The semi-structured format provides flexibility and allows the participants to elaborate on their experiences while they are addressing main topics (Patton, 2014). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thus, both instruments are complementary. The questionnaire provided quantifiable data on factors related to attrition and the interviews offered richer, more detailed qualitative information (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure consisted of two main stages including administering the self-reported questionnaire and conducting semi-structured interviews. Initially, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to 25 former EFL students who had withdrawn from the University of Garmian and 30 EFL learners who were currently studying. The questionnaire was administered in person and online, depending on the participants' availability. They were informed about the study's objectives, and their confidentiality and voluntary participation was emphasized. Following the completion of the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews was conducted with a purposive sample of 8 former EFL students. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. They allowed the participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide rich information about their reasons for attrition. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Garmian's Ethics Committee before initiating data collection. The study adhered to ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data from the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in student attrition factors. Inferential statistics were performed to examine the null hypothesis, which allowed for testing the differences between variables using Mann Whiteny U test. The reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to ensure consistency. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in the interview responses. This process involved coding the data and categorizing it into themes, which provided a comprehensive understanding of the personal, academic, and institutional factors that influence student attrition.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, several strategies were implemented. For the Content Validity, a panel of experts in the field of education reviewed the questionnaire and expert feedback was used to revise and improve the instrument before it was administered. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's alpha to measure the internal consistency of the items. Internal consistency (Cronbach's α) was evaluated for each subscale. Following Nunnally and Bernstein (1978), $\alpha \geq .70$ was treated as acceptable. In the present sample, reliability exceeded this benchmark for all scales: Academic (5 items), $\alpha = .93$; Personal (5 items), $\alpha = .92$; Institutional (5 items), $\alpha = .96$ (N = 55). For the semi-structured interviews, inter-rater reliability was assessed by having two scholars independently code the same interview transcripts. The consistency between coders was assessed using Cohen's kappa coefficient. This ensured that the thematic analysis was consistent and replicable.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided the entire research process. The study adhered to the ethical standards set out by the University of Garmian's Ethics Committee and also complied with international research ethics guideline. The participants were fully informed about the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

4. Results

The results of the study include both statistical analyses of questionnaire responses and thematic insights from semi-structured interviews with former students. Descriptive statistics summarized the questionnaire data and inferential statistics were run to provide answers to the research questions.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics for the Perceptions of Attrition Factors

This section presents the results of the descriptive statistics that were performed to show attrited and non-attrited EFL students' perceptions of academic, personal, and institutional factors that contribute to attrition. Item-level descriptive statistics for the three domains are reported in Table 1 (Academic Factors), Table 2 (Personal Factors), and Table 3 (Institutional Factors).

Table 1. *Item Statistics for the Academic Factors*

	attrited			non-attrited		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1. I was dissatisfied with the quality of teaching in my courses.	4.2400	.72342	25	3.0333	1.32570	30
2. The course content did not meet my expectations.	4.0400	.84063	25	2.8000	1.29721	30
3. I had difficulty understanding the lectures due to language barriers.	3.8400	1.06771	25	3.5000	1.13715	30
4. The program workload was too overwhelming.	4.5200	.71414	25	3.4000	1.32873	30
5. There was inadequate academic support (e.g., tutoring, mentoring).	4.2800	.79162	25	3.2333	1.30472	30

The results of the Academic Factors section of the questionnaire, which compared the perceptions of attrited and non-attrited groups, provided significant information about the factors that influence student attrition at the University of Garmian. For the Item 1 (Dissatisfaction with the Quality of Teaching), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.24, SD = 0.72) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.03, SD = 1.33). Attrited students reported significantly higher dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching compared to non-attrited students. The higher mean score suggested that poor teaching quality might be an important factor driving attrition. In contrast, the non-attrited group's lower mean indicated that they were relatively less affected or more satisfied with teaching quality. The larger standard deviation in the non-attrited group suggested greater variability in their perceptions within this group and implied that some students experienced dissatisfaction, while others found the teaching satisfactory.

For Item 2 (Course Content Not Meeting Expectations), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.04, SD = 0.84) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 2.80, SD = 1.30). Attrited students were more likely to feel that the course content did not meet their expectations, whereas non-attrited students reported a lower level of dissatisfaction. The difference implied that expectations that were not met regarding course content were strongly associated with attrition.

For Item 3 (Difficulty Understanding Lectures Due to Language Barriers), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 3.84, SD = 1.07) was slightly higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.50, SD = 1.13). Both groups reported moderate difficulty understanding lectures

due to language barriers, but attrited students scored slightly higher. The means suggested that language barriers might pose challenges to all students, although they may be stronger for those who finally withdraw. The relatively higher standard deviation for the non-attrited group again indicated variability.

For Item 4 (Program Workload Being Overwhelming), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.52, SD = 0.71) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.40, SD = 1.33). The overwhelming nature of the program workload was the highest-rated item for the attrited group (M = 4.52), which indicated a critical issue relating to attrition. The non-attrited group also reported challenges but to a lesser extent. The difference suggested that while workload challenges affect both groups, they are an important factor in withdrawal for many students.

For the Item 5 (Inadequate Academic Support), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.28, SD = 0.79) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.23, SD = 1.30). Attrited students perceived academic support, such as tutoring and mentoring, as inadequate. Non-attrited students rated this factor lower (M = 3.23), which suggested they may have found academic support sufficient or less critical to their success. These results indicated that for the attrited group academic challenges, including heavy workloads and inadequate support, were main contributors to attrition. On the other hand, difficulty in understanding lectures due to language barriers was an important but secondary concern compared to other academic challenges. The results in Table 2 display item-level descriptive statistics for Personal Factors (Items 6–10), with the largest gaps in financial difficulties, motivation, and stress.

Table 2. *Item Statistics for the Personal Factors*

	attrited			non-attrited		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
6. Financial difficulties affected my ability to continue my studies.	4.6000	.81650	25	3.7000	1.36836	30
7. I had family responsibilities that conflicted with my studies.	4.1600	.68799	25	2.9667	1.32570	30
8. I lacked motivation to continue my education.	4.4000	.76376	25	3.1000	1.32222	30
9. I experienced stress or mental health challenges that impacted my performance.	4.3600	.75719	25	3.5000	1.13715	30
10. Commuting or transportation issues made attending classes difficult.	3.9200	.99666	25	3.2333	1.22287	30

The results of the Personal Factors provided valuable information about how personal challenges influence student attrition at the University of Garmian. For Item 6 (Financial Difficulties Affected My Ability to Continue My Studies), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.60, SD = 0.82) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.70, SD = 1.37). The results revealed that attrited students reported higher financial difficulties compared to non-attrited students. The mean for the attrited group suggested that financial challenges were a

major factor that influenced their decision to withdraw. In contrast, the non-attrited students perceived financial difficulties as less of an obstacle, which indicated that they either had fewer financial problems or were able to overcome them. The larger standard deviation for the non-attrited group suggested greater variability in their perceptions, which could indicate that some students were more affected by financial constraints than others were. Overall, financial difficulties appear to be an important barrier, particularly for those who leave the program.

For Item 7(Family Responsibilities That Conflicted with My Studies), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.16, SD = 0.69) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 2.97, SD = 1.33). Attrited students reported a higher mean for family responsibilities, which interfered with their studies, compared to non-attrited students. This suggested that family obligations were much more challenging for those who withdrew from their studies. The lower mean for non-attrited students indicated that these challenges were either less prevalent or less disruptive to their academic pursuits. The standard deviation for non-attrited students was larger, which indicated that there were more variability in their responses, which may suggest differing levels of family responsibility within this group.

For Item 8 (Lack of Motivation to Continue My Education), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.40, SD = 0.76) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.10, SD = 1.32). The attrited group reported a higher mean regarding a lack of motivation to continue their education compared to the non-attrited group. This difference suggested that motivation played an important role in attrition. The non-attrited students generally had higher levels of motivation, which could have helped them persist through academic challenges. The large standard deviation in the non-attrited group highlighted that motivation levels varied considerably within this group and some students possibly faced motivation issues but managed to continue their studies.

For Item 9 (Stress or Mental Health Challenges That Impacted My Performance), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.36, SD = 0.76) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.50, SD = 1.14). Attrited students reported higher levels of stress and mental health challenges compared to non-attrited students. This indicated that mental health struggles were more prevalent among those who withdrew. The higher mean in the attrited group suggested that these stressors might be related to their decision to leave. The non-attrited group also reported stress, but to a lesser extent, which highlighted that mental health challenges affect many students, though they may not always result in attrition. The standard deviation for the non-attrited group was larger, which indicated that the impact of stress and mental health varied more widely across students who remained in the program.

For Item 10 (Commuting or Transportation Issues Made Attending Classes Difficult), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 3.92, SD = 1.00) was slightly higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.23, SD = 1.22). The results for transportation issues showed that both groups reported moderate difficulties, but attrited students experienced more challenges than non-attrited students. While commuting difficulties were not as important as other personal

factors, they were still a contributing factor for attrited students. The lower mean in the non-attrited group suggested that commuting did not highly hinder their academic engagement. However, the large standard deviations in both groups indicated that these issues affected students in different ways. For some students, commuting was a major obstacle, while for others it had a negligible impact. The results showed that for the attrited group, financial difficulties, lack of motivation, and mental health challenges appeared to be important contributors to the decision to withdraw. On the other hand, while commuting was a factor, it was not as highly rated as the other personal factors. The results in Table 3 summarize item-level descriptives for Institutional Factors (Items 11–15), indicating notable differences in facilities, belonging, and administrative processes.

Table 3. *Item Statistics for the Institutional Factors*

	attrited			non-attrited		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
11. The university's administrative processes were inefficient (e.g., registration, financial aid).	4.3200	.80208	25	3.2667	1.25762	30
12. There were limited extracurricular or campus engagement opportunities.	4.0400	.88882	25	3.0333	1.24522	30
13. I did not feel a sense of belonging to the university community.	4.4000	.57735	25	3.3000	1.29055	30
14. The university's facilities (e.g., libraries, labs) were inadequate.	4.4800	.77028	25	3.3667	1.29943	30
15. I felt the university did not address my concerns or feedback effectively.	4.3200	.74833	25	3.0000	1.36458	30

The results of the Institutional Factors section provide information about how institutional challenge affected attrited and non-attrited students differently. These items evaluated perceptions of administrative processes, extracurricular activities, campus community, facilities, and responsiveness to student concerns. For Item 11(The University's Administrative Processes Were Inefficient), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.32, SD = 0.80) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.27, SD = 1.26). Attrited students reported higher dissatisfaction with the university's administrative processes compared to non-attrited students. This suggested that inefficiencies in administrative tasks were a main source of frustration for students who finally left the program. The relatively lower mean in the non-attrited group implied that these issues, while present, were less impactful for students who persisted. The larger standard deviation in the non-attrited group indicated variability in perceptions and suggested that some students faced challenges while others experienced better administrative interactions.

For Item 12 (There Were Limited Extracurricular or Campus Engagement Opportunities), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.04, SD = 0.89) was higher than the mean of the Non-

Attrited Group (M = 3.03, SD = 1.25). Attrited students were more dissatisfied with the availability of extracurricular or campus engagement opportunities compared to non-attrited students. This indicated that a lack of opportunities to participate in campus activities or engage with the university community might have been related to the feelings of disengagement and isolation among attrited students. Conversely, non-attrited students perceived these opportunities as less problematic, which may have helped them continue the program. The higher standard deviation for the non-attrited group suggested that individual students experienced the availability and value of engagement opportunities differently.

For Item 13 (I Did Not Feel a Sense of Belonging to the University Community), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.40, SD = 0.58) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.30, SD = 1.29). Attrited students reported a stronger lack of belonging compared to non-attrited students. This difference suggested that feelings of alienation and a lack of social integration were important factors that influenced attrition. The lower mean in the non-attrited group implied that a greater sense of belonging helped these students continue the program. However, the high standard deviation in the non-attrited group indicated that some students also struggled with a sense of belonging, but it was not an important factor.

For Item 14 (The University's Facilities Were Inadequate), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.48, SD = 0.77) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.37, SD = 1.30). The attrited group reported higher dissatisfaction with university facilities compared to the non-attrited group. The attrited group's high mean indicated that inadequate facilities, such as outdated libraries or insufficient lab resources, were an important factor that contributed to their withdrawal. The non-attrited group rated facilities as less inadequate, which may have supported their ability to remain in the program. The larger standard deviation in the non-attrited group reflected variability in their experiences with facilities and suggested that while some students managed with limited resources, others were more negatively impacted.

For Item 15 (I Felt the University Did Not Address My Concerns or Feedback Effectively), the mean of the Attrited Group (M = 4.32, SD = 0.75) was higher than the mean of the Non-Attrited Group (M = 3.00, SD = 1.36). Attrited students reported higher dissatisfaction with how the university addressed their concerns or feedback and perceived the university as unresponsive to their needs, which may have affected their decision to leave. In contrast, non-attrited students rated the university's responsiveness as less problematic. The high standard deviation in the non-attrited group showed that they had varying experiences with responsiveness and indicated that while some students felt supported, others did not. The results for the attrited group suggested that physical and organizational deficiencies, as well as social isolation, were important factors that contributed to attrition but the limited availability of extracurricular opportunities had a moderator role in student disengagement. The results in Table 4 compare the perceptions of attrited and non-attrited students across the three components of the questionnaire.

Table 4. *Statistics for the Three Components of the Questionnaire*

	attrited			non-attrited		
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic Factors	25	4.1840	.65044	30	3.1933	1.05893
Personal Factors	25	4.2880	.57469	30	3.3000	1.03956
Institutional Factors	25	4.3120	.60022	30	3.1933	1.11477

For the Academic Factors, the attrited group reported a mean of 4.18 (SD = 0.65), while the non-attrited group had a lower mean of 3.19 (SD = 1.06). This difference suggested that the non-attrited students perceived the academic environment more positively. In contrast, the attrited group's higher rating showed that there were some potential academic challenges, such as dissatisfaction with teaching quality or overwhelming workload, which may have contributed to their decision to leave the program. Similarly, for Personal Factors, the attrited group had a mean of 4.29 (SD = 0.57), which was higher than the non-attrited group, with a mean of 3.30 (SD = 1.04). This difference suggested that personal challenges were more pronounced among attrited students and affected their ability to continue their education. Finally, regarding Institutional Factors, the attrited group again reported a higher mean of 4.31 (SD = 0.60) compared to the non- attrited group's mean of 3.19 (SD = 1.11). This finding implied that institutional support, including administrative processes, campus facilities, and a sense of belonging, was better perceived by the non-attrited students, whereas attrited students felt disconnected or unsupported by the university, which contributed to their decision to withdraw. Figure 1 shows the perceptions of attrited and non-attrited students across the three components of the questionnaire.
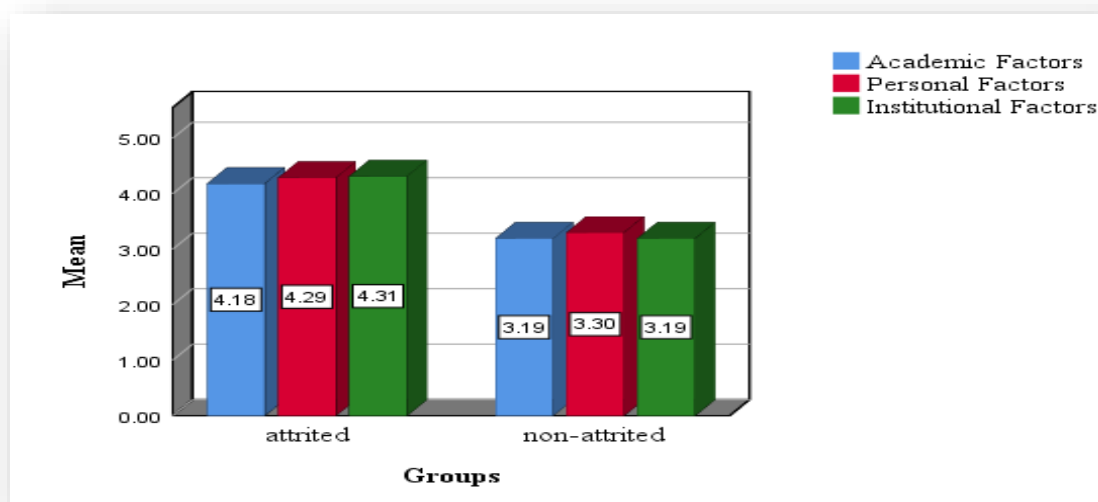

Figure 1. *Attrited and Non-Attrited Students' Perceptions across the Components of the Questionnaire*

Figure 1 showed that non-attrited students experienced more favorable perceptions across all three components. Attrited students rated academic, personal, and institutional factors as influential contributors to attrition. Among the three components, institutional factors received the highest mean rating from the attrited students, which indicated dissatisfaction with university administration and facilities, while non-attrited students rated all components lower, which suggested relatively fewer concerns in these areas.

4.2. Inferential Statistics

This section presents the results of the inferential statistical analyses that were conducted to compare the perceptions of attrited and non-attrited students across the three components of the questionnaire. First, the assumption of normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test for both groups across the three components. The results determined whether parametric or non-parametric statistical tests would be appropriate for subsequent analyses.

Table 5. *Tests of Normality*

	Group	Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Academic Factors	attrited	.908	25	.027
	non-attrited	.859	30	.001
Personal Factors	attrited	.921	25	.053
	non-attrited	.873	30	.002
Institutional Factors	attrited	.870	25	.004
	non-attrited	.919	30	.025

For Academic Factors, the attrited group had a statistic of 0.908 (p = .027), and the non-attrited group had a statistic of 0.859 (p = .001), which both indicated significant deviations from normality. For Personal Factors, while the attrited group approached normality with a statistic of 0.921 (p = .053), the non-attrited group violated normality with a statistic of 0.873 (p = .002). Similarly, for Institutional Factors, both groups showed significant deviations, with statistics of 0.870 (p = .004) for the attrited group and 0.919 (p = .025) for the non-attrited group. Thus, the data did not meet the assumption of normality for the three components and justified the use of non-parametric tests for group comparisons. To address the non-parametric nature of the data, Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to compare the perceptions of attrited and non-attrited students across Academic, Personal, and Institutional Factors. The results are in Table 6.

Table 6. *Mann-Whitney U Test*

	Academic Factors	Personal Factors	Institutional Factors
Mann-Whitney U	182.500	162.500	150.500
Z	-3.285	-3.616	-3.823
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.000
a. Grouping Variable: Group			

The Mann-Whitney U test results indicated significant differences between the attrited and non-attrited groups across all three components. For Academic Factors, the test yielded a U value of 182.500 (Z = -3.285, p = .001), which indicated that the attrited group rated these factors significantly higher than the non-attrited group and reflected greater dissatisfaction with teaching quality, course content, and workload among those who left. For Personal Factors, the U value was 162.500 (Z = -3.616, p < .01), which suggested that attrited students experienced more severe personal challenges, such as financial difficulties and stress, compared to their non-attrited peers. Similarly, for the Institutional Factors, the U value was 150.500 (Z = -3.823, p < .01), which highlighted that the attrited group perceived institutional inefficiencies, inadequate facilities, and a lack of belonging more severely. These findings indicated that attrited students experienced higher levels of dissatisfaction and challenges across all components.

4.3. Results of the Interviews

Interviews were conducted with eight former EFL students who had withdrawn from the University of Garmian. The semi-structured format allowed participants to provide in-depth responses to questions and explored their experiences, challenges, and reflections. This section summarizes their responses and provides information about the factors related to attrition and potential areas for improvement.

4.3.1. General Experience

Most participants described their overall experience as challenging and discouraging. While a few acknowledged moments of satisfaction, such as forming connections with peers or perform well in certain subjects, the majority expressed frustration with the program's structure and lack of adequate support. One participant noted, "I felt lost most of the time. The program didn't seem designed to help students succeed." Others highlighted the mismatch between their expectations and the program's delivery, which led to dissatisfaction and disengagement.

4.3.2. Challenges

All eight participants reported facing multiple challenges in terms of academic, personal, and institutional issues. Common academic challenges included having difficulty in managing the program workload and feeling unprepared due to language barriers. Personal struggles, such as balancing family responsibilities and depression and anxiety issues, further complicated their ability to continue. As one student explained, "I felt overwhelmed every day; there was no time to rest between assignments and exams."

4.3.3. Academic Factors

Participants were in agreement in their criticism of the teaching quality and lack of faculty support. Many described the teaching methods as outdated and not aligned with EFL learners' needs. One participant stated, "Most instructors read from slides without explaining, which

didn't help us understand the material." Another participant added that opportunities for one-on-one support were limited and they had to manage difficulties alone.

4.3.4. Personal Factors

Personal and family-related reasons played a significant role in many participants' decisions to withdraw. Four participants reported family obligations, such as assisting with household tasks, as major factors. Others mentioned feeling unsupported emotionally and mentally. One student shared, "My family didn't understand how demanding the program was, and I often felt uncertain between my studies and my responsibilities at home."

4.3.5. Financial Factors

Financial difficulties were a recurring theme in all interviews. Most participants struggled with tuition fees, transportation costs, and living expenses. One participant explained, "The financial problem became too much, and I had to prioritize working over studying." Some expressed frustration with the lack of financial aid or scholarships for students in need.

4.3.6. Institutional Factors

The participants generally felt a lack of community or belonging within the university and many reported the absence of extracurricular activities and insufficient opportunities for student engagement. One student remarked, "The University felt like a place where you just came to attend lectures and leave." Many also criticized administrative inefficiencies and described long delays in registration processes and unclear communication.

4.3.7. Suggestions for Improvement

Participants provided several recommendations for the university to better support its students. These included hiring more qualified and supportive faculty, offering better academic resources, and providing financial assistance to students in need. One participant suggested implementing a mentorship program, stating, "Having someone guide me through the challenges would have made a big difference."

4.3.8. Unhelpful Policies and Practices

Specific university policies, such as strict attendance rules and inflexible deadlines, were described as unhelpful and discouraging. Some participants felt these policies failed to accommodate students who faced personal or financial difficulties. As one student put it, "The university seemed more focused on rules than on helping us succeed."

4.3.9. Personal Reflection

When asked what they might have done differently, some participants expressed regret for not seeking help earlier or managing their time more effectively. However, many felt that the

systemic issues within the university was greater than their personal shortcomings. One participant reflected, "I tried my best, but it felt like the system was made us fail."

4.3.10. Open Reflection

In their closing reflections, the participants emphasized the emotional cost of withdrawing from the program and some expressed hope that their feedback would lead to meaningful change. One student concluded, "I still dream of completing my education someday. I just wish the system could support students like me better." The interviews highlighted the multifaceted nature of student attrition and showed that academic, personal, and institutional factors contributed highly to students' decisions to leave the EFL program.

4.4. Responses to the Research Questions

RQ1: What are the reasons for undergraduate EFL students' attrition at the University of Garmian in the Kurdistan Regional Government?

The findings indicated that undergraduate EFL students at the University of Garmian reported a range of academic, personal, and institutional factors as reasons for their attrition. Among academic factors, dissatisfaction with teaching quality (M = 4.24, SD = 0.72) and overwhelming program workload (M = 4.52, SD = 0.71) were important concerns. Personal challenges, such as financial difficulties (M = 4.60, SD = 0.82) and stress or mental health issues (M = 4.36, SD = 0.76), were also frequently reported by students who left the program. Institutional factors, including inadequate facilities (M = 4.48, SD = 0.77) and inefficiencies in administrative processes (M = 4.32, SD = 0.80), further increased students' dissatisfaction. These results suggested that attrition is caused by a combination of academic expectations that are not met, personal problems, and institutional shortcomings.

RQ2: To what extent do the perceptions of factors contributing to student attrition differ between attrited and non-attrited EFL students at the University of Garmian?

H0. There is no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of factors contributing to student attrition between attrited and non-attrited EFL students at the University of Garmian.

The results revealed significant differences in perceptions of factors that contribute to attrition between attrited and non-attrited EFL students. Attrited students reported higher dissatisfaction across academic (M = 4.18, SD = 0.65 vs. M = 3.19, SD = 1.06), personal (M = 4.29, SD = 0.57 vs. M = 3.30, SD = 1.04), and institutional factors (M = 4.31, SD = 0.60 vs. M = 3.19, SD = 1.11) compared to their non-attrited peers. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests confirmed that there were statistically significant differences in all three domains and p-values ranged from .001 to <.001. The Attrited students particularly highlighted issues such as inadequate teaching quality, financial challenges, and administrative inefficiencies as important barriers to their continuation. These findings rejected the null hypothesis and showed that there were differences between the two groups in the perceptions of factors contributing to student attrition.

RQ3: What are the recommendations provided by former EFL students who have withdrawn from the University of Garmian to reduce attrition rates?

Former EFL students who withdrew from the University of Garmian provided several key recommendations to reduce attrition rates. They emphasized making improvements in academic support, institutional resources, and student engagement. They also highlighted the need for hiring qualified and supportive faculty who can adopt student-centered teaching methods and provide personalized guidance. Establishing mentorship programs and offering better academic resources, such as tutoring and language workshops, were also recommended to address academic challenges. The students suggested increasing access to scholarships, financial aid to reduce financial problems. Enhancing campus engagement through extracurricular activities and fostering a sense of belonging were considered important for improving institutional support. Additionally, the participants wanted the university to organize administrative processes flexibly, improve communication, and revise strict policies to accommodate students who face personal or financial difficulties. These recommendations showed that the participants wanted the development of a more supportive and inclusive learning environment, which they believed could reduce attrition rates and improve student retention in the program.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide useful information about the factors that influence student attrition within the EFL program at the University of Garmian, and the results underscore the importance of academic, personal, and institutional factors in shaping students' decisions to withdraw—patterns consistent with previous research on student retention (Ertem & Gokalp, 2022; Kannan & Yadati, 2025). Quantitatively, the between-group gaps were not trivial: withdrawn students reported uniformly higher concerns across all three components, with medium-to-large differences (see Section 4.2), indicating effects of practical significance rather than statistical artefacts. This cumulative pattern aligns with Tinto's integration perspective in which academic and social/institutional conditions jointly support or erode persistence (Tinto, 1975).

Regarding academic factors, the dissatisfaction with teaching quality reported by withdrawn students in this study aligns with prior work showing that ineffective, lecture-heavy methods and limited faculty support contribute to dropout (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2024; Sribayak, 2017). Many participants also reported an overwhelming workload, matching Shannon's (2024) observation that sustained academic pressure—especially for students juggling multiple responsibilities—can precipitate burnout and withdrawal. In an EFL program, the dual task of mastering disciplinary content through a second/foreign language can compound cognitive load, so that even modest deficits in instructional clarity or feedback are amplified. Mechanistically, heavy workload and low instructional support plausibly increase stress and reduce self-regulatory resources, which then depress performance and motivation, making withdrawal more likely unless counterbalanced by timely academic scaffolding (e.g., tutoring, formative feedback, and mentoring).

With respect to personal factors, financial difficulties emerged as a major barrier to retention, echoing Contini and Zotti (2022) who show that financial problems are strong predictors of dropout. Students in this study cited tuition, transportation, and living costs as persistent pressures. These constraints likely operate through time-use and stress pathways—greater paid work hours and chronic worry reduce study time, focus, and sleep—thereby undermining academic integration. The salience of stress and mental-health items in our data reinforces this pathway. Without adequate financial aid, emergency grants, or accessible counselling, otherwise surmountable academic barriers may become decisive.

As regards institutional factors, shortcomings within the university also played a significant role. A weak sense of community and administrative inefficiencies contributed to feelings of alienation, consistent with De Silva et al. (2022), who found that students who feel disconnected from their university environment are more likely to withdraw. Participants highlighted limited extracurricular opportunities, inadequate facilities, and slow or opaque procedures. These conditions not only blunt motivation and belonging but also discourage help-seeking and engagement, thereby weakening both academic and social integration. Notably, while language barriers affected both groups, they did not differentiate as strongly as institutional and financial items, suggesting that institutional climate and responsiveness can be decisive levers even in language-intensive programs.

Regarding socio-cultural context, this study contributes by examining EFL attrition in the Kurdistan Region, where resource constraints, commuting patterns, and family obligations are common, and where culturally responsive academic support may be limited. Such contextual factors—less visible in research from well-resourced, residential universities—can intensify workload and financial pressures and dilute campus belonging in ways underrepresented in the broader literature. Addressing the specific socio-political and institutional conditions of Kurdistan (e.g., clearer administrative pathways, affordable transport/housing options, peer mentoring that respects local norms) is therefore essential to improving EFL student retention in this region.

Importantly, the mixed-methods design strengthens these interpretations: survey differences at the component level converge with interview narratives describing feeling "lost," overburdened by workload, constrained by finances and family duties, and disconnected from campus. This triangulation increases confidence that observed quantitative gaps reflect lived obstacles rather than measurement noise. At the same time, I acknowledge boundary conditions: the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, self-report may involve recall or desirability biases, and the single-institution sample constrains generalizability. Even so, the magnitude and consistency of effects across strands point to plausible, actionable mechanisms.

6. Conclusion

This study's findings suggest several strategies to reduce attrition rates and improve student retention in the EFL program at the University of Garmian. The main recommendations include

improving teaching quality, financial support programs, fostering a sense of community, and streamlining administrative processes.

Faculty development programs that are aimed at enhancing instructional practices could significantly improve student engagement and academic performance. Instructors can foster a more engaging and supportive learning environment by integrating active learning, interactive content, and personalized support (Carver-Thomas& Darling-Hammond 2019). Additionally, providing professional development opportunities for faculty members in effective language instruction would help address the academic challenges that are faced by students.

Financial aid is also important in addressing the financial burdens that are faced by students. The university should consider increasing scholarships, grants, and low-interest loans to reduce the financial problem on students. Furthermore, providing affordable on-campus housing and transportation options could help reduce the cost of living and make higher education more accessible to economically disadvantaged students.

Moreover, developing a stronger sense of community within the university is important. Encouraging extracurricular activities, student organizations, and peer mentorship programs can create a more supportive campus culture. Building connections among students, faculty, and administration can help foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of alienation, which have been shown to contribute to attrition (Hascher & Hadjar, 2018).

Finally, improving the efficiency of administrative processes, such as registration, financial aid, and academic support, could reduce frustration and confusion for students. Timely communication and clear procedures are important in ensuring that students feel supported throughout their academic journey.

While the study provides useful information about the factors that contribute to student attrition, several limitations should be considered. The sample size was relatively small and there were only 25 attrited students and 30 non-attrited students, which limits the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample would provide a stronger and comprehensive analysis of the factors that influence attrition across a broader population. Additionally, the study was conducted at a single university, which meant that the results might not be representative of EFL programs at other institutions or in different regional contexts. Future research should seek to expand the study to include multiple universities and EFL programs in different socio-political environments.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data from questionnaires and interviews, which may be subject to bias. While the semi-structured interview format allowed for rich qualitative information, participants' reflections may not fully capture the complexity of their reasons for attrition. Triangulating the questionnaire and the interview data with other sources, such as academic records and institutional reports, could provide a more comprehensive view of the factors that influence student attrition.

In terms of the delimitation, this study focused specifically on undergraduate EFL students at the University of Garmian who had voluntarily withdrawn from the program and those who

remained in the program. The research did not include the perspectives of faculty members or administrators. Therefore, the findings are mainly reflective of the attrited and non-attrited students' experiences and do not capture the views of other stakeholders, which may limit the scope of the analysis. Future studies could explore the experiences of faculty and administrators to gain a more holistic understanding of the factors that contribute to student attrition.

Future research could further explore the role of cultural factors in attrition among EFL students in non-Western contexts, particularly in regions with socio-political challenges like Kurdistan, could provide a better understanding of the barriers that students face. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to assess the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to reduce attrition. For example, examining the impact of financial aid programs, mentorship initiatives, or curriculum changes on student retention rates could provide useful information about how universities can better support students in the long term. Furthermore, research into the perspectives of faculty members and administrators could help to create a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence student attrition in EFL contexts and inform more appropriate retention strategies.

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Appendix A

Attitude questionnaire

Category	Question	Scale
Academic Factors	1. I was dissatisfied with the quality of teaching in my courses.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	2. The course content did not meet my expectations.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	3. I had difficulty understanding the lectures due to language barriers.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	4. The program workload was too overwhelming.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	5. There was inadequate academic support (e.g., tutoring, mentoring).	Likert Scale (1-5)
Personal Factors	6. Financial difficulties affected my ability to continue my studies.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	7. I had family responsibilities that conflicted with my studies.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	8. I lacked motivation to continue my education.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	9. I experienced stress or mental health challenges that impacted my performance.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	10. Commuting or transportation issues made attending classes difficult.	Likert Scale (1-5)
Institutional Factors	11. The university's administrative processes were inefficient (e.g., registration, financial aid).	Likert Scale (1-5)
	12. There were limited extracurricular or campus engagement opportunities.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	13. I did not feel a sense of belonging to the university community.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	14. The university's facilities (e.g., libraries, labs) were inadequate.	Likert Scale (1-5)
	15. I felt the university did not address my concerns or feedback effectively.	Likert Scale (1-5)

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Question Number	Question	Focus Area
1	Can you describe your overall experience as a student in the EFL program?	General Experience
2	What specific challenges did you face that influenced your decision to leave the program?	Challenges
3	How would you describe the quality of teaching and support you received from faculty members?	Academic Factors
4	Were there any personal or family-related reasons that contributed to your decision to withdraw?	Personal Factors
5	How did financial considerations impact your ability to continue your studies?	Financial Factors
6	Did you feel a sense of community or belonging within the university? Why or why not?	Institutional Factors
7	What could the university have done differently to support you and other students?	Suggestions for Improvement
8	Were there any specific policies or practices that you found unhelpful or discouraging?	Institutional Factors
9	Looking back, is there anything you wish you had done differently while in the program?	Personal Reflection
10	Is there anything else you would like to share about your decision to leave or your experience?	Open Reflection