This paper is a part of a wider research program concerning the assessment of quality at University. It was selected by the Department of University Policies (Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation) in an attempt to determine the causes and “reasons” underlying dropping school in our country. The Program includes three sub-projects concerning both academic and socio-professional success, delay and failure (dropping out). Our specific aim here is to determine the psychosocial reasons for failure at University (qualitative aspect). The sample includes University students who quit studies at UNCuyo in a period of 20 years (1987-2004). A quasi-qualitative methodology was applied so as to be able to explain and more fully understand the importance of the causes and the reasons underlying their quitting. 212 indicators were used. Results show different profiles connected with the same variables/psychosocial dimensions (n-ach, expectations, fatalism, self-eficacy, life projects, social representations of the importance of university degrees in relation with insertion in the labor market, etc.) underlying drop-outs.

EMPIRIC-METHODOLOGICAL DECISIONS

This study was carried out in two stages: 1980-1987 and 1988 until present. It involved a significant fieldwork: at-home tracking of over 3,000 dropouts who entered UNCuyo from 1988 on in 18 different courses of study.

Sample

Consisted of 1,905 individuals, according to institutional records, although only 445 were found and surveyed in their homes. It was carried out in all the courses of study of UNCuyo (Except Law). Odontology, Bromatology and Arts. Many different professional life profiles were noticed, especially if we consider that, during such period of time, there were changes in the economic situation and the market, which made insertion, continuance and professional promotion more difficult.

The sampling was stratified, random and systematic. The sampling error was of 4.4 and the confidence interval was of 95.5%. The survey was carried out at home.

Techniques

A semi-structured type of survey was used which involved different types of variables, covering a wide range (212 indicators). The quantitative techniques included interview and non-obstructive observation.

Variables

There were grouped according to the components of the model: 1) core, psychosocial and objective determining factors; 2) pedagogical and institutional factors; 3) social factors (work market). Operationnalization implied statistic treatment (quantitative) and process analysis (qualitative). The psychosocial factors are dealt qualitatively. Some of the core variables are: Ambitions, Engagement, Value of a university degree, Pessimistic perspective, N-ach, Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction (with the university/Work), Expectations (personal, academic, at work). All of them provide a way to measure the sense of selffulfillment, fatalism, instability, lack of regulations, etc.

RESULTS

This study gives rise to a large amount of relationships between variables and qualitative nodes. At this stage, we choose to define the most valuable psychosocial aspects observed in individuals who abandon schooling as well as the influence that the demands from the work market and the answers given to such demands by Universities have on drop-outs. Given the variety of relationships, we chose to present the results following the topics that are a more favorable position within the labor market, recruit individuals with different basic, cultural and personal features. In fact, the ones who choose those courses are individuals from high social strata, of lower ages in average, and have reached higher levels of success in secondary school; who belong to families with a higher cultural level and a better socioeconomic situation.

However, at the psychosocial level, they are more ambitious people, more secure, with definite and clear personal goals, committed to their career choice, which they have usually chosen according to their vocation. In addition, they are more selective and demanding in the academic level and, as they think, they should provide adequate training in researching and latest methodologies, the poor connection between curriculum content and the labor market, etc.

Always, in this “academic model,” the recrutment is for motivated and hardworking individuals. Although they choose longer and more difficult courses of study, they graduate sooner and in a higher proportion.

The opposite approach for the individuals that choose the less prestigious courses of study (connected to the “soft sciences”, according to this typology); they often come from less privileged homes, socioculturally speaking, and have poorer competencies and social skills. The academic model of the psychosocial profile is clearly different from those within the previous typology as regards expectations, n-ach, life project, adaptation, fatalism, apathy, dissatisfaction.

Some specific conclusions: in those courses of study, those who drop out declared that they had never really chosen the course they desired; at the moment of choosing, they prioritized economic factors, job possibilities over vocation and personal fulfillment. They thought, at the moment of entering university, that they had to decide to enter university for it was “the only thing to do” after high school in a country in labor insertion problems. In addition, they had a very strong self-perception about degree obtained and its importance in the academic career, which in some cases, affected the choice of the university. Many had to study and work at the same time, and they evidenced less enthusiasm and perseverance on their studies; they declared they were not willing to make “sacrifices” as a result of the lack of offer – education; they entered university already considering dropping it out if they got a job; many start being very uncertain about finishing their professional goals were quite vague.

As regards their work expectations, they were very low; there appeared high levels of fatalism and discouragement. These individuals drop out, although they choose objectively shorter and less expensive studies. Anyway, what is really interesting is that the relationship between the variables was never linear and, ultimately, the factors influencing such success or failure derive from the very human being; psychosocial individuals who make choices and take responsibilities or not, take commitments, have an identity, with or without ambitions, who believe in personal and social progress, think effort makes everything possible. On the other hand, there are others who think, on the contrary, that everything is determined by chance or luck; or those who take full responsibility, or those who hold the structures responsible for their failures, or those who try to overcome the situation even with the most serious psychosocial factors proved to be significant in dropping out, although drop-out is usually attributed to specific economic factors.