



THE CHALLENGES FACED BY LEARNERS IN THE CONTEXT OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the country's pioneering and leading Open and Distance Learning (ODL) state university. OUSL is unique in Sri Lanka because of the adaptation of ODL techniques in offering the programmes. Learner support services are the most vital component of any ODL system. It includes a wide range of academic and other related activities. Major benefits of ODL are related to its flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and life-based education opportunities to learners. Open and distance learning has grown into an important global strategy in resolving problems of access to education (UNESCO, 2004). However, the ODL system has its own unique issues. The high rate of student drop-out and delayed program completion is among the most serious issues. High dropout rates and late program completion are indications of underlying issues that ODL learners' encounter. The high percentage of student drop-out and late program completion are two of the most serious issues. High dropout rates and late program completion are indications of underlying issues that ODL students face. A critical challenge faced by distance education in Sri Lanka is limited learner support for the students. Many difficulties arise as a result of these challenges in distance learning. The high percentage of student drop-out and delayed program completion are two of these issues. Dropout rates reported by open and distance learning institutions are typically higher than those reported by conventional universities. Within ODL educational systems, dropout rates also vary depending on the educational system adopted by each institution and selected subjects of study (Narasimharao, 1999). In theories of student retention, student dropout is a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and institutional systems during which the individual's experiences in the ODL method.

In this study, the key objective is to investigate the challenges related to individual, emotional and institutional levels faced by students of ODL at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by analyzing the data from questionnaires qualitatively & quantitatively. This research was descriptive research done in the study setting in OUSL.



There were two variables as difficulties in ODL and learners in OUSL. The population was identified according to the necessity of the research and the study consisted of learners in all faculties of the OUSL. In 2018, the total number of students was approximately 39,908 in OUSL. In this study, for the selection of samples, the Convenience sampling technique has been adopted. According to the Yamane method, the sample size should be 100. The methods of primary data collection were adopted by using questionnaires focusing on learners in OUSL. The questionnaire was used, as it was the best way available to the researcher to collect data. The questionnaire had closed-ended questions to be administered to the learners other than those closed-ended questions where the respondent will have the comfort of choosing whatever he/she feels for each question. The IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) Statistics Version 22 and MS Excel 2016 were used to process and analyze the data. In this study. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze students' perceptions about challenges faced by learners and the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reliability analysis measure indicates the extent to which it is without bias and hence ensures consistent measurement across time and the various items in the questionnaire, in other words, the reliability of a measure is an indication of the stability and consistency with which the instrument measures the concept and help to assess the goodness of a measure.

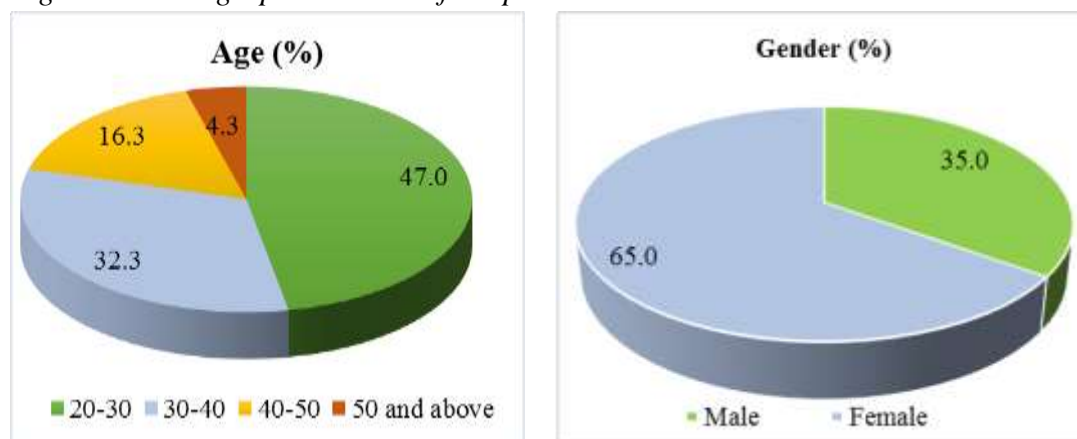
Table 1: Reliability Test

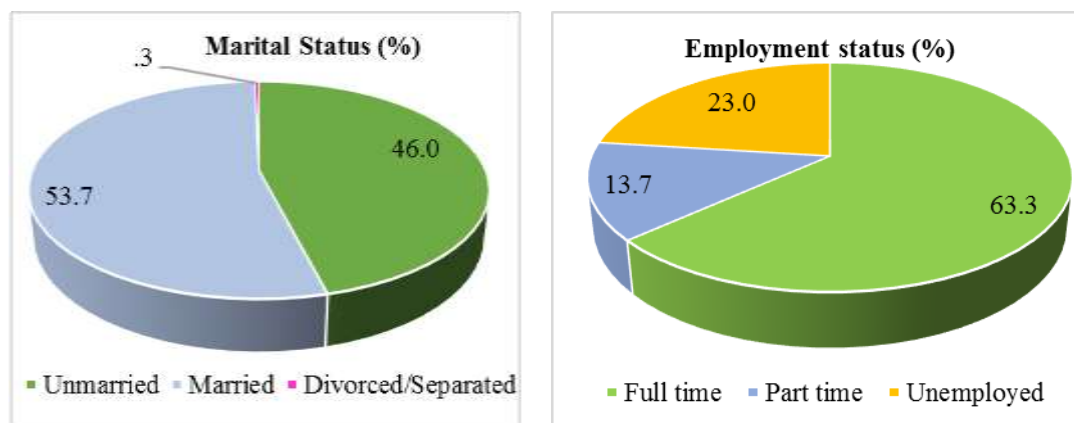
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.861	23

Source: Sample Survey, 2021

The above table shows that the value of Cronbach's Alpha of 23 items used in this study is 0.861. The data is considered reliable since the value of Cronbach's Alpha is 0.8, which is acceptable more than 0.8 indicates that the data is Good. Therefore, it can be concluded that the reliability of data is high.

Figure 1: Demographic Details of Respondents





Source: Sample Survey, 2021

There are 47% of learners representing 20 to 30 years old category and 32% of learners representing 30 to 40 years old category. Also, 16.35 of learners representing 40 to 50 years old category and 4.3% of learners representing 50 and above years old. Also, there are 35% of males and 65% of females took the questionnaires in this study. The marriage situation of the learners in OUSL is that 53.7 percent of them are married, 46 percent of them are unmarried and 0.3 percent of them lost their spouse (widowed) or separated. The employment status of the learners in OUSL illustrates that about 63.3 % of learners are full-time employed and 13.7% of learners are part-time employed. 23% of learners are unemployed in the OUSL (See figure 1 for more details).

Table 2: Challenges facing ODL students

		N	Mean	Decision
Individual (learner) related challenges facing ODL students	Lack of sufficient time for study	100	3.51	Agree
	Distance from home to the regional center or study center	100	3.40	Neutral
	Financial constraints	100	3.67	Agree
	Lack of support from family, employer, friends, etc.	100	4.02	Agree
	Unfavorable home learning environment.	100	3.12	Neutral
	Conflicts between family /Work and study schedule.	100	4.12	Agree



Institutional related challenges facing ODL students	Delayed/ineffective study period at OUSL	100	4.20	Agree
	Lack of academic support	100	3.42	Neutral
	Difficulty in attending Day Schools	100	1.70	Disagree
	Difficulty in attending practical (Ex: Lab.)	100	3.01	Neutral
	Poor course material design/ inappropriate learning materials	100	2.00	Disagree
	Unhelpful course information and lack of direction	100	3.45	Neutral
Emotional related challenges facing ODL students	Family responsibilities affect learning in OUSL	100	3.89	Agree
	Lack of balance between job and studies	100	4.72	Strongly Agree
	Anxieties affect Learning in OUSL	100	2.74	Neutral
	Feel very depressed	100	2.61	Neutral
	No motivation to study	100	3.61	Agree
	Feel like dropping out	100	3.75	Agree

Source: Sample Survey, Dec. 2021

In Table 2, the result shows statements about Individual (learner), Institutional, and Emotional related challenges facing ODL students. If we consider the Individual (learner) related challenges facing ODL students, indicated that the respondents agreed that lack of sufficient time for study, financial constraints, lack of support from family, employer, friends, etc., and conflicts between family /Work and study schedule. A delayed/ineffective study period at OUSL is the main institutional-related challenge faced by learners. Also, considering the emotional related challenges facing ODL students, indicated that the respondents agreed that family responsibilities affect learning in OUSL, no motivation to study, and feel like dropping out. However, it is found that although emotional-related factors have been



one of the most affected by the challenges faced by learners in the OUSL and student-related factors are also affected.

Furthermore, learners suggest SMS alerts about their assignments from OUSL and 21% of learners suggest motivational mail or message from the university occasionally to boost their morale.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to investigate the challenges in the open distance learning of open university students in Sri Lanka. The results revealed the following main themes: conflicts between family /work and study schedule; delayed study periods and lack of or incapability of keeping the balance between job and studies. The majority of respondents said that family responsibilities and work-life balance with studies are the major challenges facing open and distance learners. Also, delayed study periods specifically semesters and/or academic years at OUSL affect the learners. Also, it was noted that improvements can be done in the aspects such as the distribution of study materials, information transfer to the learners, support to be in phase, and timely feedback to students.

Effective learning of open and distance learners and ensuring high completion rates can be achieved by resolving the challenges the learners face. The Open University of Sri Lanka should take measures not only to improve the institutional support but also to help the individual and emotional aspects discussed above which will help those registered learners to keep the balance between work-home-study. Enhanced learner support services and initiatives to fill the identified gaps would be helpful to overcome the challenges faced by the learners.

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