



A STUDY ON STUDENT DROPOUTS IN THE BSC DEGREE PROGRAMME AT THE ANURADHAPURA CENTRE OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only National University in Sri Lanka to offer the programmes entirely through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) education model. Anuradhapura Regional Centre (ARC) is one of the regional centres of the OUSL out of nine regional centres. The number of students registered for the Bachelor of Science (BSc) Degree programme offered by the Faculty of Natural Sciences is low compared to the other regional centres that were established after the ARC. The intake of new students is affected by the number of graduates who passed out from the ARC. Hence, the status of newly registered students at ARC within five consecutive academic years from 2012/2013 to 2016/2017 was extracted using the Open University Management Information System (OMIS) in 2023 and identified the students who did not continue the re-registration as dropouts. The reasons for dropping the degree were collected through telephone call interviews and a thematic analysis was used to categorize them. The number of students who graduated/continued was 44 out of 187. Newly registered students within the selected period were an average of 24%. Thus, the average of total dropout was 76% and the maximum dropout was observed during the first year with the range of 50 – 72%. This gradually reached the range of 70 – 93% after five years of initial registration. The reasons for dropouts were categorized into four broad themes, namely, personal circumstances, employment-related issues, institutional context, and learner context. Some students who dropped the course after two or more years indicated financial difficulties. However, when carefully looking at the academic records in the OMIS, poor academic performance and re-registering for repeat courses several times seem to be some of the reasons. The institutional context and certain learner context issues are under the university's control and proper personal counselling during re-registration, implementing peer-assisted learning environment and expanding the academic activities such as day schools and practical sessions at ARC are suggested to reduce the dropout rate. However, future studies are recommended to identify and expand the themes further with the current reasons for dropouts and develop strategies to overcome them.

Key words: Open Distance Learning, BSc degree, student dropouts, OUSL

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INTRODUCTION

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only National University to facilitate education solely through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system. In 1988, Anuradhapura Regional Centre (ARC) was established as the fifth regional centre of the OUSL to expose the higher education needs of students in the North Central Province in Sri Lanka. Currently, The OUSL covered the higher education needs at regional level through nine regional centres. However, the number of students registered at ARC is not sufficient for the Bachelor of Science (BSc) Degree offered by the Faculty of Natural Sciences compared to other regional centres established after the ARC (Natural Sciences Faculty Board, 2023). The graduates are the main contributors in conveying the message to the general community. The number of students who graduate per year from the ARC has affected the popularisation of the degree in this region. It has also been affected the increase in the number of registrants per year. The completion of the BSc Degrees offered by the Faculty of Engineering Technology and Natural Sciences has been associated with attendance at the academic activities and competency in English at the entry-level (Ranasinghe, *et al.*, 2021). Further, the Faculty of Health Sciences has reported dropout rates for students for the three-degree programmes: Nursing, Medical Laboratory Science and Pharmacy as 14%, 23% and 30%, respectively, and a lack of peer support, course-related and work-related factors as the most common factors for dropouts (Herath *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, this study was conducted to analyse the dropout rates of the students who registered from ARC for the BSc Degree programme offered by the Faculty of Natural Sciences and to identify the reasons to suggest strategies to minimize dropouts in the future.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative study was conducted to determine the reasons for the dropout of the students registered from the ARC for the BSc Degree programme offered by the Faculty of Natural Sciences. The data collection was done for five consecutive academic years, from 2012/2013 to 2016/2017. The registration numbers of new registrants for each academic year were extracted from the available personal files at ARC. Using the registration numbers, re-registration status and academic status were recorded from the OUSL Management Information System (OMIS) in January 2023.

Students who did not re-register continuously were considered as dropouts (143 students) and the year of last registration was extracted further from the OMIS. After filtering the contact numbers, all students who dropped the degree were interviewed through telephone calls with an average of 3-4 minutes. Out of 143 students, 19% of the students had not given any telephone number at the registration and 34% of the contact numbers were no longer in use while 30% of the calls were not answered.



Based on the responses (20%), thematic analysis was done to define the codes and themes to identify the real reasons for dropouts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The status of the newly registered students during five selected academic years in 2023 is given in Table 1 with the dropout rate based on the re-registration data.

Table 1: The number of registrants and their status for five consecutive academic years

Academic Year	Registered	Dropped	Dropout Rate (%)	Graduated	Still Continuing
2012/2013	29	24	87	2	3
2013/2014	29	28	97	1	0
2014/2015	32	26	81	3	3
2015/2016	37	25	68	5	7
2016/2017	60	40	67	5	15

According to Table 1, the number of students who graduated and continued their degree by 2023 is 16 and 28 respectively out of 187 students registered during these five academic years and the total percentage is about 24%. Further, based on the last re-registered academic year, the number of academic years they retained in the Degree after the first registration was counted and its relationship with the dropout rate is shown in Figure 1.

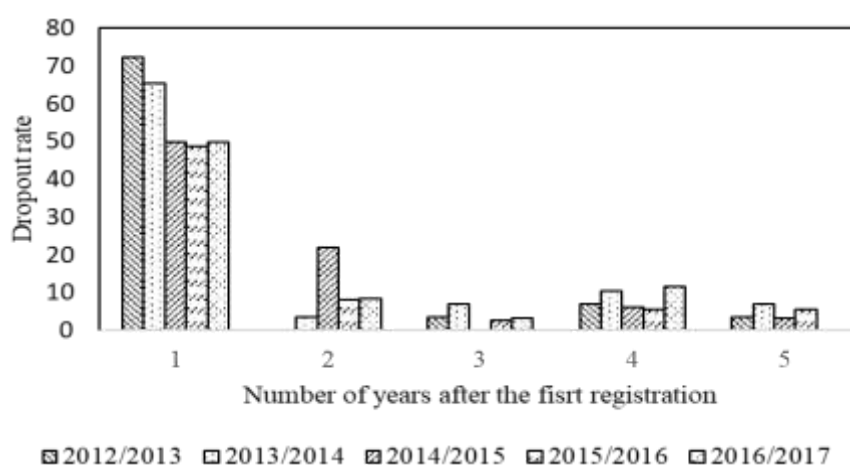


Figure 1: Student dropout rates with the year of registration for five academic years

The trends of dropout rates for five academic years after the first registration were illustrated in Figure 1, as the students who registered in the academic year 2016/2017 have completed only five academic years by 2023. The range of the total dropout rate was 68–97% and it showed the maximum dropout rate with the range of 50–72% during the first year of registration. The dropout rate gradually decreased and reached the range of 3–5% after five years.

The reasons for dropping the degree collected from the students through the telephone call interviews were categorized into four broad themes, namely, (1) personal circumstances; family issues, relocation, and financial issues, (2) Employment;



current /new opportunities (3) Institutional context; academic, administrative support and learner resources, (4) Learner context; time management.

The personal circumstances were related to the family issues such as parents' child commitments, marriage, pregnancy and financial difficulties. The students who indicated financial difficulties showed poor academic performance according to the OMIS data. A few students had to relocate their residence with their marriage and face traveling difficulties to the centre.

The employment-related issues were identified as changing the job role and place, being unable to get leave to attend the practical sessions, being unable to balance work and study and receiving new job opportunities such as teaching and nursing which are full-time government opportunities. Some of the students have received a job after registering for the degree, and temporarily changing the residence has also been another reason for dropouts.

The institutional-related issues raised by the students were recognized as not conducting day schools at ARC, having to travel to other regional centres for the compulsory practical sessions and lack of peer student support. Learner context issues were related to study time management and registering for the courses overestimating their capacity.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The reasons for dropout in the BSc Degree programme were categorised into four themes: personal circumstances, employment, institutional context and learner context. The institutional context factor is under the University's control such as unavailability of the academic activities at ARC such as day schools, practical sessions and peer-assisted learning environment. In literature, it has recorded the positive influence of peer-assisted study sessions (PASS) on students, and performance in their first year (Bandarage *et al.*, 2021). If PASS is implemented at ARC, it will support increasing the student's performance at ARC. However, it is a challenge at ARC due to the limited number of students who graduated/continued the BSc Degree programme. Learner context issues related to study time management can be minimized by the institute to some extent by proper personal counselling during the registration by registering them to manageable credits.

Most of the students have more than 5 academic years to complete the degree, especially, students registered after the academic year 2015/2016. Therefore, the students who are continuing the BSc Degree with poor performance should be identified by the academic counsellor during the first re-registration and advised to complete Level 3 and slowly achieve the target without dropping the BSc Degree. Future research should be carried out to expand the dropout themes and the subthemes identified in this research with the students currently registered for the BSc Degree programme and develop strategies to reduce the dropout rate.

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