



THE FINISH LINE IN SIGHT: UNDERSTANDING ON-TIME DEGREE COMPLETION AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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This study explored the critical factors influencing timely degree completion among students at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), an institution dedicated to individuals seeking flexible higher education. While OUSL provides robust institutional support and pedagogical approaches, a significant number of students exceed the specified degree completion timeframe. This study argues that beyond external factors, students' internal traits, especially determination, discipline, and work ethic, play a significant role in timely graduation within OUSL's self-directed learning environment. Employing a mixed-methods approach with a questionnaire and in-depth interviews, the study examined 70 former/current OUSL students, purposively divided into on-time completers (OTCs) and extended completers (ECs). Thematic analysis of the data revealed significant contrasts. OTCs had consistently demonstrated steadfast determination with clear goals, maintained orderly and non-negotiable study routines, engaged proactively and deeply with course material, exhibited high resilience in the face of adversity, and strategically used OUSL and external support mechanisms. In contrast, ECs often displayed unstable motivation, inconsistent study habits characterised by procrastination, reactive and superficial engagement with course material, lower resilience when facing challenges, and reluctance in seeking support. The findings highlight that delays in degree completion at OUSL are largely due to struggles with self-regulation, persistence, and the ability to prioritise within the strains of self-directed learning. Conversely, timely completion is a powerful testament to unwavering commitment and rigorous self-discipline. This study concludes that while OUSL offers an invaluable and flexible platform, a student's intrinsic attributes of determination, hard work, and orderly self-management are paramount to achieving academic goals efficiently. Cultivating these intrinsic abilities, alongside institutional support, can meaningfully empower OUSL learners to complete their degrees on time, thereby contributing to national human capital development.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), degree completion, student success

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INTRODUCTION

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) provides a lifeline to countless individuals who are unable to pursue conventional on-campus degree programmes due to various reasons such as geographical constraints, employment commitments, and personal circumstances. The OUSL embodies the principles of flexibility and self-directed learning, allowing students to learn at their own pace and convenience by practising the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system (Sivalogathan, 2019).

While a commendable number of OUSL students meticulously reach degree completion within the stipulated duration, a noticeable number of undergraduates exceeded the recommended timeframe. This significant discrepancy raises crucial questions about the factors that differentiate successful, timely completers from those who are not (Aluwihare & De Silva, 2016).

While elements such as institutional support, pedagogical approaches, and technological infrastructure are undeniably vital and well-addressed by OUSL's robust system (Jayatilleke & Kulasekera, 2020), this study shifts the focus to the student's internal landscape. It contends that, within the unique context of OUSL, where self-direction, personal responsibility, and managing multiple life roles are paramount, attributes such as unwavering determination, rigorous discipline, and an unyielding work ethic play a disproportionately significant role in achieving on-time graduation. Accordingly, this research aims to explore this proposition by probing into the lived experiences of OUSL alumni/current students, seeking to recognise the mechanisms, mindsets, and strategies employed by those who successfully complete their degrees within the stipulated timeframe, and to identify the contributing factors for those who inadvertently delay their studies. By offering an informal, yet insightful, account of approaching these former students, this study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of the pathways to OUSL success.

The existing literature on ODL success is extensive, frequently focusing on institutional factors, technological platforms, and student support services, which are all highly relevant to the OUSL context (Zuhairi et al., 2019). More recent scholarships have delved into the complexities of student retention and completion in ODL, highlighting unique challenges such as isolation, lack of direct interaction, and inherent difficulties with time management (Wimalasiri et al., 2022). These challenges are specifically relevant for OUSL students who often balance studies with full-time employment and family responsibilities.



Several theoretical frameworks underpin the understanding of student persistence and success in ODL. Tinto's (1993) model of student integration, though originally formulated for traditional campus-based settings could be adapted to ODL contexts, even if virtual or through limited face-to-face interactions. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits that intrinsic motivation, self-sufficiency, competence, and relatedness are vital for sustained engagement and performance which are highly relevant to self-directed OUSL learners. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, with its emphasis on self-efficacy and agency, also provides a valuable lens through which to observe students' beliefs in their ability to succeed, particularly in a system like OUSL where individual effort is paramount.

However, a gap exists in the literature regarding the deep personal and internal factors that differentiate on-time completers from those who struggle within an ODL framework. While external support and institutional mechanisms are crucial, the internal drive, resilience, and personal discipline of the ODL student are often underemphasized as primary success factors. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by prioritising the OUSL students' intrinsic attributes and their direct impact on their academic trajectory, offering insights specifically relevant to the Sri Lankan ODL landscape.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data gathered through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. This triangulation of methods allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the factors influencing on-time degree completion at OUSL.

The target population was a purposive sample of former/current students of OUSL, who had successfully completed their undergraduate degree programmes as well as those who are yet to complete. To capture the core research question, participants were carefully divided into two main groups: on-time completers (OTC) (individuals who completed their degree within the stipulated minimum duration for their respective programmes and extended completers (EC) (individuals who took/have taken/are taking significantly longer than the stipulated duration to complete their degree).

The respondents were approached through alumni associations, specific OUSL social media groups for past and present students, and personal connections with former OUSL students known to the researcher, and the approach was deliberately casual, friendly, and non-intrusive. A total of 70 former and current OUSL students were approached, resulting in 55 complete questionnaires and 20 in-depth interviews (12 OTC, 8 EC).

The collected data underwent thematic analysis, proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2012) under broader themes identified as 'study habits and strategies', 'motivation and self-regulation', 'perceived challenges', 'support mechanisms', and 'perceived success factors'.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On-time completers (OTCs): A story of unwavering resolve and proactive engagement

The analysis revealed distinct and consistent characteristics among the OTC group.

Steadfast determination and clear goals:

The OTCs articulated specific reasons for their commitment, ranging from career progression, promotions at the workplace, being a role model for their children, or a sense of accomplishment. As one OTC respondent (32, female, B.Sc. graduate) shared, "From day one, my absolute goal was to graduate in three years. I could picture myself in the convocation robe. That vision kept me going through every single day." This highlights a clear sense of purpose and a high degree of self-motivation.

Orderly time management and non-negotiable study routines:

A significant majority (90%) reported having a structured, non-negotiable study schedule, which they diligently adhered to, irrespective of personal commitments. They treated their OUSL studies with the seriousness of a full-time job or a critical personal commitment. An OTC (36, male, BA graduate) commented, "I allocated specific hours every single day, even on weekends, and strictly stuck to them. It was like going to teach; it wasn't optional." Procrastination was actively acknowledged and managed through strategies like breaking down large assignments into smaller, more manageable daily tasks.

Hands-on and deep engagement with course material:

OTCs had consistently engaged with the OUSL course material and reported consistent reading, thorough notetaking, active participation in online forums, and promptly seeking clarification from their tutors. Their learning was not merely about memorisation; it was about deep understanding and application. "I never left assignments for the last minute. I'd read ahead, made notes, marked my queries, and started working on assignments as soon as they were released," mentioned an OTC (35, female, MBA graduate) exhibiting a proactive learning approach.

Resilience in the face of adversity:

The approach of OTCs for challenges such as demanding jobs, work-life balance, technical issues with online platforms, family commitments, and occasional self-doubt was distinctly different. They viewed obstacles as temporary setbacks and not as insurmountable barriers. "There were so many days I felt utterly overwhelmed, especially when my child was sick or work was crazy. But I'd take a short break, remind myself of why I started, and get right back to it," an OTC (40, female, LLB graduate) explained. They demonstrated high levels of resilience, problem-solving capabilities, and adaptability.



Strategic and efficient use of OUSL and external support:

The OTCs would proactively reach out to OUSL tutors and their academic coordinators for specific academic queries, engage with peers for discussion and motivation, and communicate their study commitments to their families and workplaces to garner necessary understanding and support. This was a deliberate, efficient leveraging of resources precisely when needed to enhance their self-directed learning.

Extended completers (ECs): The weight of unfulfilled intentions and reactive struggles

In contrast, the EC group presented a different set of experiences and behaviours, often characterised by good intentions but inconsistent execution.

Shifting motivation and unclear goals:

Many EC respondents expressed a desire to complete their OUSL degree but lacked the intense and clearly defined motivation seen in the OTC group. Their goals were frequently less articulated, or they struggled to maintain focus over time. "I knew I wanted the degree, but life just kept getting in the way. I'd get motivated, then lose it again," an EC (38, male BA graduate, who took 8 years) revealed. This had often led to cycles of prolonged inactivity and disengagement.

Inconsistent study habits and procrastination:

A significant majority (75%) of EC participants admitted to highly inconsistent study habits and a tendency for procrastination. An EC (30, female B.Sc. student, yet to complete after 7 years) confessed, "I'd tell myself I'd study on the weekend, but then a family event would come up, or I'd just be too tired, and suddenly it's exam time and I've barely opened a book." They largely lacked a structured timetable or consistent routine, relying instead on last-minute cramming.

Reactive and superficial engagement with course material:

ECs tended to engage with OUSL course material reactively, typically only when assignments and examinations were due. This resulted in a superficial understanding, high levels of stress, and often incomplete learning. They were less likely to participate in online discussions, attend optional study centre sessions, or seek early clarification, leading to academic difficulties and a feeling of being constantly behind.

Overwhelmed by challenges and lower resilience:

While facing similar external challenges as the OTC group, EC respondents appeared more easily overwhelmed by them. A demanding work period, family crisis, or even minor technical glitches with OUSL's online platforms could lead to prolonged breaks and feelings of despair, leading to complete disengagement. "When my job got really busy, I just couldn't juggle it all. I felt like I had to choose,



and studies often got postponed indefinitely," an EC (45, male, LLB. graduate, who took 9 years) shared. This exhibits the less effective coping mechanisms of ECs.

Hesitation to seek support:

Many EC respondents reported feeling too embarrassed to ask for help when they fell behind, or they were simply unaware of support services available at OUSL. They often struggled in isolation, deepening their feelings of being overwhelmed. "I just kept telling myself I'd figure it out on my own," an EC (33, female, BA student, yet to complete after 6 years) remarked.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that a student's internal attributes of determination and hard work are significant contributing factors to timely degree completion. The findings demonstrate a clear contrast between on-time completers, characterised by their proactive goal setting, disciplined study routines, remarkable resilience, and strategic use of OUSL support, and extended completers, who often struggled with fluctuating motivation, inconsistent habits, and feeling overwhelmed by challenges.

The narrative of delay-in-degree-completion at OUSL is not merely about external circumstances (though these can play a role); it reflects a profound struggle with self-regulation, sustained perseverance, and an inability to unswervingly prioritise and manage the inherent demands of self-directed learning. Conversely, "finishing on time" at OUSL is a powerful testimony to unwavering commitment, and rigorous self-discipline, proving that within the ODL framework, students hold significant agency over their academic trajectory. The success stories from OUSL's on-time completers provide clear evidence for effective self-management in distance learning.

In conclusion, while OUSL provides an invaluable and flexible platform for higher education, the ultimate success in timely completion rests significantly on the student's own determination, hard work, and orderly self-management as well. By strategically nurturing these intrinsic abilities, alongside vigorous institutional support, OUSL can truly empower its learners to cross the finish line within the stipulated time, realising their academic goals efficiently and effectively, and contribute to the nation's human capital development.

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