

Factors Affecting the Completion of Post Graduate Degrees using Distance Mode

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The Open University of Sri Lanka has been conducting Post Graduate Degree Programmes since 1985. The number of students registered from 1985 – 2007 were 128 and only 46 (36%) of them completed, 37 (29%) are still following and 45 (35%) have dropped out from the programme. In the recent years from 1998 to 2007 (10 years) the total number of students registered were seventy and only thirty three (47%) have completed, twenty four (34%) are still progressing and 13 (19%) have given up the programme. Analysis of the above statistics showed this significant dropout rate and was identified as a researchable area. Furthermore, the drop-out rate is a critical issue as the Open University is the only institution in Sri Lanka which provides opportunities to do research in the distance mode.

Drop-outs in the area of research in distance education which has been given much importance. Reckkadal (1983) has stated that over the last ten to twenty years dropouts is the problem which has been given the highest priority by researchers within the distance education area. Most of the studies on drop-outs in the distance education defined drop-outs as a loss of students after registration and before the final examination. In this study the term “non completion” means not completing within the maximum stipulated period and the cancellation of registration without completing the research.

The problem of drop-out in distance education is widely recognized and has been subject to consideration and investigation. (Garrison, 1987, Kember, 1989, Zajkowski, 1992). The drop-out rates for distance education courses are higher than those for comparable on-campus courses.

Hommadai (1990) had conducted research studies on higher education in the third world countries to reveal constraints which affect the completion of higher degree researches. The researcher indicated that the absence of an adequate policy and the programming of research work in the universities, the reluctance to allocate funds for research, inadequate resources, the failure to allocate staff time for research, the lack of commitment and the inadequate competence of supervisors as major impediments to research.

In another study Ismail (1997) have identified three major types of theoretical models related to drop-outs, i.e., the student institutional fit model which stresses that institutional variables are more influential on drop-outs decisions, the student environmental fit model which stresses that home and environment variables are more influential on drop-out decisions and individual-congruence model where drop-out and the participation depend on how individual variables interact with environmental and institutional variables.

Wanasinghe (1989) and Ismail (1997) have carried out studies on drop-outs of Open University of Sri Lanka. Wanasinghe (1989) had classified factors which cause students' drop-out under two major categories; student based and course based. Their surveys revealed that the major factors responsible for the students discontinuing their studies at the Open University of Sri Lanka are mainly student based. Personal, social and economic reasons appear to have influenced the drop-out too.

Ismail (1997) had conducted a study to find out the factors influencing the student drop-out from the educational programmes offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka. Out of the seven sets of variables identified using the factor analysis method the economic background variables, the demographic variables, the variables related to student behavior of the student support system and the variables related to distance from the home to the institution were more significantly influential on drop-outs. The sets of variables related to sponsorship, home and work environment were found not contributing to the drop-outs. Major finding of this research is the strong relationship found of drop-out and quality of the support system and the student satisfaction with the support system provided by the institution. The researcher had developed a model as a measure of intervention to overcome the constraints faced by the distant learners at the Open University of Sri Lanka, by giving special attention to the support system which is focused more on locally based human contacts.

The study which was carried out by Parker (1995) on drop-outs of Maricopa Community College in the United States determined two variables, locus of control and the source of financial assistance could

predict nearly 85% of dropouts in distance education. Interviews conducted with non completers provides an insight into the personal and private reasons, such as the lack of time, the management skills and ill defined educational goals were the reasons given for the students' non completion of degree programmes.

Powell and Woodly (1995) conducted a research and based their analysis on data drawn from three distance teaching universities; Open University in the Netherlands, Atabasca University in Canada and Open University in United Kingdom. The central argument of this paper is that much of what is normally considered drop-outs in the open distance education system, is an artifact of the process of participation in adult education and is not analogous to the leaving behavior in the conventional education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The broad aim of this study is to identify the factors that facilitate and hinder the completion of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy Degrees. The objectives of this study were to identify the background characteristics of the research students, to examine the factors affecting the completion of the Post Graduate Degree Programmes and to suggest appropriate areas under which improvements could be made within the resources available.

The Research Method

The survey method was used as the research method

The Sample of the Study

The total number of students registered from 1998 to 2007 (70 students) representing all four faculties were considered as the sample of this study. Only 51 students responded. Ten students did not respond and nine were unable to contact. Three categories of students were identified. They are those who have successfully completed the study programme, those who are still following the study programme and those who have given up the study programme.

Table – 1-Sample of the Study

Have completed		Still progressing		Given up	
N	%	N	%	N	%
23	45	18	36	10	20

Data Collection Methods

Questionnaires were used as the main instrument of obtaining the feed back from the students. In addition face to face interviews were also conducted with a sample of 10(20%) students to identify in depth the factors influencing the completion of the programme. The questionnaire was designed to identify three main aspects, personal information, environmental factors and institutional factors. The section on environmental factors has six sub sections: background characteristics, social factors, employment factors, language factors, time factor and economic factors. The section three institutional factors has two sub sections, academic and non academic.

Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis of responses was done on the basis of the frequencies of the responses. Frequencies were recorded as percentages. Important variables were cross – tabulated with a number of other variables, to pay more attention to specific issues related to each section.

DISCUSSION

Personal Information

The respondents of this study are adult learners and the majority (70%) of them is married. It is interesting to note that 65% of the respondents received encouragement from family members and were undisturbed by family commitments when engaged in their research work. However 30% mentioned that their home environment was not ideally conducive to research work. As such, providing this group with an environment that is conducive to research work within the university premises will be a worthy exercise.

The majority of respondents was self motivated and had academic intentions in doing research such as to extend and enhance knowledge to obtain professional qualifications and promotions. Sixty percent of the research students are University employees and two third of the respondents are directly involved in academic careers. Undertaking research studies is an essential criterion for career development for university academics. This need may have been a major motivating factor to do research.

Thirty percent were not granted leave by the respective academic institutions. This factor may have affected the successful completion of research work. Research students may have faced difficulties in conducting research work while holding career responsibilities. Continuous work is crucial to successful research work. Due to inadequate leave benefits respondents found it difficult to devote time for studies on a continuous basis. Around forty percent of the respondents spent an average time of less than 12 hours per week on their research studies, which seems to be insufficient to make satisfactory progress. It is noticed that eighty percent of the “successfully completed” respondents had spent an average time period of more than twenty hours per week on their research studies. Inadequate allocation of time and lack of time management may have made a significant contribution towards a failure. Inability to devote sufficient time is one of the major reasons cited by the drop out respondents for their incompleteness of their studies. Wanasinghe (1989), Ismail (1997) Parker (1995) have highlighted that student based personal factors have influenced the drop out in the distance education sector.

Language Factor

Almost all the respondents have done their research work in English, which is not their mother tongue. When interviewed, the majority of them mentioned about reading, comprehension and writing difficulties. However according to the questionnaire data the percentage who claimed such difficulties is around 33%. Thus the language factor too must have affected successful completion of the Post Graduate Degrees.

Income Factor and Financial Benefits

Nearly 60% of the respondents had a income rate of Rs. 20,000 – 30,000. Only 10% had an income above 30,000. None were involved in additional earning sources. These statistics reveal that most of the respondents do not possess a sound economic back ground. This situation may have had influenced on their research studies. Despite their limited income only a few have received financial aid from their institutions in the form of research grants, Hommadai (1990) had stressed in his research that inadequate allocation of funds for research work in the third world countries has become an obstacle.

Institutional Factors

Nearly 50% were satisfied with the nature of the programme structure. When interviewing in isolation of researchers, lack of peer group interactions, limited number of seminars and work shops, involvements in research work without a sound basic knowledge in research methodology were seen as hindering factors.

Supervisors

As per data gathered from questionnaires most of the respondents had positive attitudes towards their supervisors and claimed satisfaction in terms of their guidance, counseling and monitoring procedures. Supervisors were available in most instances and are / were committed and dedicated to their students. Only a few students claimed dissatisfaction with their supervisors. However, it is noticed that a sizeable percentage (15%) of respondents are not satisfied or not at all satisfied with supervisors feedback in relation to their research work. Interview data provides some criticisms made about supervisors. They are insufficient knowledge of the relevant field, change of supervisors due to transfer to other institutions, supervisor's other work load, allowing students to proceed with research work without proper guidance in research methodology and not conducting feasibility analysis at the early stage. Some dropout students have mentioned lack of supervisory support as the main reason for their failure.

Facilities

Library facilities provided for students appear to be adequate for some students and inadequate for some students. Forty percent of students complained that the material relevant to their field was not available. Sixty percent of the students are satisfied with the attempts taken by the the Open University of Sri Lanka library to cater to their needs.

Non Academic Factors

Majority of students were satisfied with the administrative procedures. However few were unhappy about the lengthy period of time gap between the submission of the thesis and the viva. One student complained that the time period between submission of the thesis and the viva was one year and three months.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research study reveal that the majority of the respondents find it difficult to devote time for studies on a continuous basis. As leave benefits are essential to a continuous research process, the institution should promote full pay leave, half pay leave or no pay leave benefits and also grant release from work for few hours.

As the majority of research students do not belong to the high income groups, grants and loans should be provided. It would be very helpful if the University could introduce a special interest free loan scheme to support internal students.

To minimize the language barrier faced by the researchers, the language department of Open University of Sri Lanka could introduce an English course to develop academic reading and writing skills. Such short term courses were once conducted for internal staff members for few years. Such comprehensive courses could be offered to both internal and external students, who are engaged in research studies. They need such assistance to improve their language skills.

Hommedi(1990) stressed that inadequate research programme designed in the universities of developing nations has affected the completion of research degrees. The following could be introduced in order to upgrade the Post Graduate Degree Programmes.

- Provide printed material on research methodologies
- Conduct more seminars and work shops. Such face to face sessions will provide opportunities for peer group interactions and discussions which in turn will result in motivation and psychological boost.

- Develop a research culture among students

More sessions could be conducted at the institutional levels and a lesser number in the latter levels. This suggestion is in accordance with the model which has been developed by Ismail (1997) which stressed the importance of a support system with human contact to decrease the drop – out rate.

As there is no specific time period for registration , students are registered throughout the year, It is suggested to allocate a specific time period for the registration of Post Graduate Degrees. (Eg. February and October). It would also be helpful to organize seminars and workshops for the initial year,

The lengthy time gap between the submission of thesis and the viva was a problem that was revealed. Such a delay may lead to student stress, The viva should be conducted within a specific time frame after submission of the thesis.

As their home environment of some students is not conducive to research studies, it is necessary to create a suitable atmosphere in the university premises by providing a study area with necessary facilities. A section from the Open University library could be allocated to a resource study room and be equipped with electronic media such as computers, internet and e – mail facilities etc. Researchers should be allocated to take their own study material into this area. The library facilities should be upgraded to have a better collection of books that are useful for research work.

The above study revealed that there are facilitating and hindering factors which affect the completion of Post Graduate Degrees using distance mode at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

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