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EXPLORING ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL): FRAMEWORK TO MITIGATE DROPOUT RISK AMONG UiTM STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This research study aims to explore the factors that contribute to the dropout risk in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) setting and, thus, develop a framework to mitigate this risk, particularly among Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) students. As such, research objective one investigates the factors that contribute to the dropout risk in the ODL setting. Through qualitative interviews, this study has gathered in-depth insights into the personal, academic, socio-economic, and institutional factors that influence dropout decisions. Research objective two focuses on developing a framework to mitigate dropout risk among UiTM students in the ODL setting. Building upon the findings from research objective one, the framework was designed to address the identified factors and provide practical approaches to enhance student motivation and support. The findings of this research will contribute to the existing literature on dropout risk in ODL settings, providing insights into the unique challenges faced by UiTM students. The developed framework will serve as a practical tool for UiTM and other institutions to implement strategies aimed at reducing dropout rates and improving student retention in ODL programs. Ultimately, this study seeks to enhance the overall learning experience and success of UiTM students in the ODL environment.

Keywords: Student Dropout, Open and Distance Learning, Higher Education, Information Management.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a response to the pandemic has illuminated both the potential and challenges of remote learning. Malaysia's diverse educational landscape has navigated the shift to ODL with varying degrees of success [1]. Despite its promise, ODL's adoption has revealed issues such as limited digital infrastructure, connectivity gaps, and varying degrees of preparedness among students, all of which contribute to student attrition [2]. Hence, raises the urgency to understand the rate of attrition during ODL within the Malaysian higher education context. Particularly, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) as a leading Malaysian institution, has embraced ODL to ensure educational continuity during the pandemic. As UiTM transitioned to remote learning, the unique challenges faced by its students became apparent. The sudden shift to ODL platforms prompted by the pandemic exposed students to challenges related to digital literacy, access to technology, and the absence of physical interactions. Understanding the experiences of UiTM students within the ODL framework and the factors influencing attrition rates is essential for developing targeted interventions.

ODL introduces a flexible educational opportunity that offers students the freedom to study from anywhere and at any time over the Internet. Nevertheless, shifting the constraints of a conventional lesson structure and promoting an independent learning mode can be a "double-edged sword" for students. On one hand, it presents enormous chances to improve traditional education, however, it can also present a significant obstacle to the pedagogical application of online education. ODL necessitates that students have a high degree of autonomy and responsibility in choosing their courses of study. To finish learning assignments and consequently reach the associated learning goals, students must be able to manage their study time throughout the allocated learning periods.

However, the aim could not reach every student and some of them might fail to complete their study due to many reasons. Higher education institutions continue to face a substantial and expensive problem with student attrition, also known as student dropout. Universities and students both suffer

from attrition. Failure to complete a degree will hinder students' efforts to improve their socioeconomic standing, but for universities, attrition results in a significant financial loss and harms their reputation because this performance is crucial to how the institution will allocate funding for its current and graduate students [3]. Therefore, a qualitative study is needed to understand the reasons behind those learners' decision to leave their studies, to allow for a better understanding of students' behaviours and factors contributing to the early dropout risk, particularly in open and distance learning environments [4].

METHOD

The study utilized a semi-structured interview approach to collect data from 15 former students of Universiti Teknologi MARA, who had dropped out of their studies. Participants were purposively selected based on their availability and willingness to share their experiences. The sample included individuals who had dropped out from UiTM within the past few years during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia which resulted in the Movement Control Order in the year 2020, representing various programs, disciplines, and levels of study. The interviews were conducted from early August to late November 2022, based on the availability and scheduling preferences of the participants. The interviews were carried out via video conferencing with applications such as Google Meet or Zoom Meetings, depending on the preferences of the participants. A semi-structured interview guide was developed for the study, which included open-ended questions and prompts to explore the participants' reasons for dropping out, their experiences during their online studies at home, and their perceptions of the factors that contributed to their decision to discontinue their studies.

In addition, the interview guide was designed to allow for flexibility and in-depth exploration of the research topic. The interviews lasted for an average duration of 30 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes, depending on the responses and engagement of the participants. Before the interviews, the participants were provided with information about the background, purpose and nature of the study, and their informed consent was obtained. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's permission, and detailed notes were taken during the interviews to capture important points and observations. For data analysis, NVivo 12 was used to analyze the data [5]. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Themes and patterns were identified from the interview data, and the findings were interpreted in light of the research questions and study objectives. The study followed ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and privacy, and maintaining the anonymity of the participants. The study received ethical approval from the UiTM ethics review board.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 highlights factors that contributed to the dropout risk in an ODL setting. Data from the 15 respondents are presented in descending order from highest to lowest of which factors reported by respondents in causing student attrition. The factors are: (i) Self-Regulation Factor - students frequently struggle with poor self-organization because they lack the drive to pursue self-directed learning. This dependence on instructor direction stems from the conventional face-to-face classroom environment. It emphasizes the necessity for students to take greater responsibility for their learning and self-regulate their study habits, as relying solely on instructors is insufficient, (ii) Personal Factor - this study found that when students first switched to ODL, they frequently went through a type of "culture shock" and lacked the prerequisite training for this new way of learning. Students were commonly burdened by personal obligations and distractions while at home. Moreover, ODL also tended to reduce students' interest in their studies because there was no personal connection between them and their teachers, (iii) Teaching Quality Factor - the study found that 14 out of 15 respondents shared their concerns and frustrations regarding the teaching quality during ODL classes. Their feedback shed light on various aspects of teaching that they found lacking or problematic, including lecturer teaching styles, feedback responses from lecturers, and overall engagement with students. One of the primary concerns expressed by the students was related to the teaching styles employed by the lecturers in the ODL setting. The students craved more interactive sessions that would foster meaningful exchanges of ideas and allow for clarifications on complex topics. The lack of real-time interaction and dialogue with their lecturers

created a sense of detachment and hindered their ability to fully grasp and apply the course content, (iv) Environmental Factor - the introduction of ODL brought to light the significant influence of geographical location on the Internet speed, resulting in slower connections in rural areas compared to urban counterparts. This discrepancy in Internet speed made it difficult for students to learn. Slower internet users had the option of seeing class recordings later, but this made it more difficult for them to participate in real-time discussions. Additionally, in instances where presentations are involved, this might affect students' academic achievement.

Table 1: Results of Qualitative Study

Factors	Times referenced	Percentage
1. Self-regulation	59	23.0%
2. Personal	53	20.7%
3. Teaching Quality	41	16.0%
4. Environmental	38	14.8%
5. Emotional	21	8.2%
6. Financial	20	7.8%
7. Communication	13	5.1%
8. Technological	11	4.3%

In addition, (v) Emotional Factor - this study found that the shift to remote learning from home has resulted in a notable absence of connections with peers, replacing all in-person interactions with screens and text messages. This circumstance frequently causes feelings of isolation while studying or working together on group projects. ODL presents difficulties for instructors as well because it makes it difficult to build emotional connections with students, (vi) Financial Factor - the sudden shift to remote education requires access to computers, laptops, tablets, or smartphones, as well as a stable internet connection. These additional expenses put a financial strain on many families, especially those who were already facing economic challenges. Moreover, the cost of online learning varies across different courses. Some courses required students to purchase specific software, access online platforms, or subscribe to digital resources, which further added to the financial burden, (vii) Communication Factor - this study discovered that eight respondents reported that their lecturers experienced problems with their internet connection during online classes. These issues ranged from intermittent connectivity to complete disconnection. As a result, students faced disruptions, lagging, and even complete interruptions in their learning sessions. Such internet-related problems hindered the flow of the class, affected real-time interaction, and impeded the delivery of course content, (viii) Technological Factor - the respondents highlighted the specific hardware requirements they lacked, including earphones, microphones, laptops, phones, and reliable internet connection. These hardware limitations have impacted their ability to effectively communicate, complete assignments, and ensure a smooth learning experience in ODL. For active involvement, teamwork, and engagement in online discussions, good audio quality is essential.

In summary, this study identified the following recommendations to reduce the risk of dropout among undergraduate students: (i) Prioritize Teaching Quality by recognizing that teaching quality emerged as a crucial factor in student attrition, institutions should focus on improving the quality of online instruction. This includes training instructors in effective online teaching methods, providing them with the necessary tools and resources, and promoting engagement and interaction in virtual classrooms, (ii) Enhance Self-Regulation Skills by giving the significant role of self-regulation in ODL, institutions should invest in programs and resources aimed at developing students' self-regulation skills. Providing guidance on time management, goal setting, and study strategies can empower students to take greater responsibility for their learning, (iii) Supportive Learning Environment by creating a supportive online learning environment that minimizes distractions and fosters concentration. This can include providing students with guidelines for setting up productive study spaces at home and encouraging them to minimize interruptions during online classes, (iv) Accessible to Technology by addressing the digital divide by ensuring that all students have access to the necessary technology and internet connectivity for ODL. Institutions can explore options for providing devices and affordable internet access to students who need them, (v) Regular Revision Practice by encouraging students to adopt regular and thorough revision practices. Promoting the importance of reviewing course materials

can help students consolidate knowledge, identify areas of weakness, and prepare effectively for assessments, (vi) Engagement and Interaction by implementing strategies to enhance student engagement and interaction in the online learning environment. This can involve incorporating collaborative activities, group discussions, and peer-to-peer interactions to create a sense of community and reduce feelings of isolation, (vii) Mental Health Support by recognizing the potential mental health challenges faced by students in ODL, especially in light of isolation and distractions. Provide access to counselling services and resources to support student's emotional well-being, (viii) Flexibility and Communication by offering flexibility in course schedules and communication channels to accommodate students' diverse needs and circumstances. Ensure that instructors are accessible and responsive to students' inquiries, particularly during off-class hours, and (ix) Monitoring and Intervention by implementing a system for monitoring students' progress and identifying those at risk of attrition early in their ODL journey. Provide timely interventions, such as academic advising or tutoring, to support struggling students. Hence, implementation of these recommendations will help students adapt to the challenges of online learning and maximize their growth potential.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this research has shed light on the multi-layered factors contributing to student attrition in the realm of ODL. Through a systematic examination of these factors, critical areas have been identified that demand attention to enhance student retention and success in ODL settings. The findings underscore the paramount importance of self-regulation skills among ODL students. To mitigate attrition, educational institutions need to put a high priority on programs that help students become more goal-oriented, time-efficient, and disciplined—all of which are critical for success in an online learning environment.

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