

Factors Influencing Student Dropouts at Postgraduate Online Programs

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Abstract

One indicator of an online program's efficacy is the dropout rate. By-passing geographic, social, economic, and temporal barriers, distant learning studies addresses the educational demands of residents and improves educational advantages inside a country's geographical jurisdiction or even outside its borders. The main purpose of the study is to understand the factors influencing student dropouts in the postgraduate online programs. The research has been conducted with a quantitative approach. Data collection was conducted via a personally administrated questionnaire, interviews and a variety of academic sources have been utilized. The factors influencing the student dropouts in the postgraduate online programs were identified as student skills, level of satisfaction, external factors and internal factors. The major findings of the study was that all factors are essential in order to minimize the student dropouts.

Keywords: Online education, postgraduate programs student skills, level of satisfaction, external factors and internal factors.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise in popularity of online learning is altering the face of education [6]. As mentioned by Willging & Johnson (2004, p. 105) [5], questions have been raised concerning the efficacy of this new approach to delivering education. One indicator of an online program's efficacy is the dropout rate. By-passing geographic, social, economic, and temporal barriers, the approach known as distant learning studies addresses the educational demands of residents.

Online courses enroll more students than traditional campus courses, but they also have higher attrition rates, according to a study of enrolment and attrition rates for the online MBA program at West Texas A&M University. According to Willging & Johnson (2004, p. 106) [5], in order to perform that study, 15 graduate business courses over the last three years taught both on-campus and online by the same professor were examined. Attrition (reduction in the number of registered students), despite the enormous interest in suitable design and development, is one of the key problems of online education.

The main purpose of the study is to identify the factors influencing student dropouts in the postgraduate online programs. It is essential to conduct the research in order to reduce student dropouts. Only limited number of researches have been conducted regarding student dropouts and postgraduate online programs offered in Sri Lanka.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The primary data collection tool used was a personally administrated questionnaire and interviews for a sample size of 35 students. Data was gathered with both open ended and close ended questions. Some of the key questions asked were 'What influenced you to join the postgraduate online program?', 'Are

you familiar with using a computer?' and 'Were you able to attend for the virtual lectures with your busy time schedule?'. Secondary sources of data including books, journals and academic publications have been utilized. The outcomes of the study were compared with the data available in the literature.

III. RELATED WORKS

Various models were analyzed to understand the factors influencing student dropouts in the postgraduate online programs. According to the findings, the factors influencing the student dropouts in the postgraduate online programs were identified as student skills, level of satisfaction, external factors and internal factors. The theories and models used are relevant for the study since it is applicable to the online education setting and particularly distinguishes between unconventional and traditional students.

Tinto's Student Integration Model

According to Tinto (1993) [1], throughout a student's enrollment in a program, interactions between the student and his or her educational environment contribute to attrition. 50% of respondents agreed the same. However, Tinto's model has only limited application for educators who wish to research the persistence of nontraditional students who differ from conventional students in terms of their nature and features (Rovai, 2003 [4]; Bean & Metzner, 1985 [2]). Tinto acknowledged that when employed with nontraditional students, his paradigm needed to be modified (Tinto, 1982) [1].

Bean and Metzner's Student Attrition Model

A conceptual model for nontraditional students' dropout was created by Bean and Metzner [2] in 1985 and included factors such as academic performance, intention to leave largely impacted by academic and psychological results, background and defining elements, and environmental variables. 50% of respondents agreed with the academic performance. Unconventional students are more impacted by the outside world than traditional students.

Kember's Longitudinal Process Model

As a result, Kember (1989) [3] suggested a longitudinal process model of drop-out distant education and offered ideas for evaluating the model (e.g., developing reliable instruments, conducting both qualitative and quantitative research, etc). In Kember's longitudinal model (Kember, 1989) [3], it is acknowledged that factors that intervene between initial student characteristics/background and persistence should be taken into account when analyzing students' social and academic integration. 70% of respondents agreed that internal factors influenced them.

Rovai's Persistence Framework

Rovai (2003) [4] suggested a composite persistence model that was mostly based on the two models. The model included two pre-admission variables—student characteristics and skills before to admission—as well as two post-admission variables—external factors and internal factors (e.g., finances, employment hours, outside encouragement, etc.). (e.g., academic integration, social integration, self esteem, interpersonal relationship, study habits, advising, absenteeism, etc.). 50% of respondents agreed that external factors affected them.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the data gathered from the primary and secondary sources, it was identified that as student skills, level of satisfaction, external factors and internal factors influence student dropouts in the Postgraduate online programs.

Table 01: Factors Influencing Student Dropouts in the Postgraduate Online Programs

| Factor | % of respondents |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| Student skills | 50 |
| Level of satisfaction | 50 |
| External factors | 50 |
| Internal factors | 70 |

As presented in the table, internal factors have majorly influenced student dropouts in the postgraduate online programs. Time constraints acted as a major issue when collecting data. Students skills, level of satisfaction and external factors have acted as influencers as well.

Student skills

Rovai (2003) [4] added student competencies such computer literacy, information literacy, time management, reading and writing, and computer-based interaction. The dropped out students of the Postgraduate division (SLTC Research university) mentioned that time management was a key issue since most of the students were managing studies along with jobs. Rovai (2003) [4] mentioned the importance of student abilities prior to an online course or program, but few researches have specifically looked at these elements.

Level of Satisfaction

The dropped out students of the postgraduate online program stated that level of satisfaction is essential. Interviews with participants in a distance master's degree provided by Boise State University were undertaken. Interviews were conducted with students who left the distant learning program and those who stayed in it between 1989 and 1996. The degree of

satisfaction with the program's first/ second course was the key determinant as stated by Willging & Johnson (2004, p. 105) [5].

External factors

The external elements that are most frequently examined or noted include time constraints, family issues, finances, work status, and management assistance. These issues were stated by the interviewed candidates as almost all of the candidates were doing jobs and faced the above issues. Time conflict is the one that is mentioned the most frequently (Willging & Johnson, 2004) [5] among these. The majority of online students are part-time workers with many responsibilities because they are working.

Internal factors

Tinto (1993) [1] included academic integration, social integration, goal commitment, institutional commitment, and learning community. Several internal aspects, including study habits, counseling, absenteeism, course availability, program fit, contentment, were also covered by Bean and Metzner (1985) [2]. Additionally, Rovai (2003) [4] incorporated student demands such program clarity, self-esteem and school identity. These factors were also accepted by the interviewed candidates.

IV. CONCLUSION

The use of online learning is growing in the education sector due to post COVID and work demands. Student skills, level of satisfaction, external and internal reasons were identified as the factors influencing the student dropouts in the postgraduate online programs. Each factor must be taken into consideration in order to reduce student dropouts in the postgraduate online programs. If all factors are positively met, the students would retain in the postgraduate online programs.

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