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REASONS FOR UNDERGRADUATES NOT ATTENDING DAY SCHOOLS IN THE FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES, OUSL

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Though attending day schools (DSs) is not compulsory according to the Open Distance Learning concept, it is always promoted. Recently, there were some concerns about low attendance of students for most DSs conducted for the Bachelor of Science Honours in Nursing degree programme at eight Regional Centres (RCs) of the OUSL, and for Bachelor of Medical Laboratory Sciences (BMLS) Honours and Bachelor of Pharmacy Honours degree programmes at the Colombo RC (CRC). Therefore, this study was aimed at investigating the reasons for non-attendance of DSs by undergraduates of respective degree programmes and to identify their preferences regarding attending DSs with regards to days and time.

This was a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted among all undergraduates who sat for the final examination of semester one during the period of December 2017 to January 2018. Data were collected using a content-validated, self-administered questionnaire, which consisted of socio-demographic information, academic and work-related information and reasons for not attending DSs. A total of 1672 undergraduates (Nursing n=1397; Pharmacy n=127; BMLS n=148) participated in the study. Among them, the majority were females, were married and had children. The findings show that most of the undergraduates preferred to attend DSs during weekdays while the majority of nurses preferred attending DSs from 10.30am to 2.30pm (66%) whereas most of the Pharmacy and BMLS students preferred attending DSs from 8.00am-10.00am. This difference may possibly be due to the nature of the duty and changes of their duty shifts among undergraduates. A considerable proportion of Nursing and BMLS undergraduates did not attend DSs as they were not compulsory. Most of the Nursing, BMLS and Pharmacy (30%-50.4%) students did not attend DSs due to family reasons. Difficulties in traveling and distance from CRC were reasons for non-attendance among BMLS and Pharmacy students. A high workload due to the shortage of staff (>71%), poor support from peers and superiors (>39 %) and not having enough study leave (Pharmacy 51.1% and BMLS 36 %) were other reasons. With regard to university factors, most of the undergraduates have accepted that course timetables were not appropriate for them. In comparison to the Pharmacy and BMLS students, a higher proportion of Nursing students have accepted that they did not attend DSs as they had good course materials to self-learn and they received good support from learning materials download from My OUSL. It shows that the availability of alternative resources is a key reason for students not attending DSs.

The most common reasons for not attending DSs found in this study were family commitments, difficulties in travelling, a high workload, and inappropriate course time tables, DSs not being compulsory, availability of good course materials to self-learn, good support received from the learning materials downloaded from the MyOUSL. Thus it is essential to consider some of these modifiable reasons when planning the delivery of undergraduate degree programmes by the Faculty of Health Sciences in the future.

Keywords: Open Distance Learning, Undergraduates, Reasons for absenteeism, Day schools

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