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Extended Abstract

**FACTORS AFFECTING ATTRITION AMONG DISTANCE LEARNERS: FINDINGS OF  
PANEL STUDIES ON LEARNER BEHAVIOR OF THE FOUNDATION STUDENTS  
DURING YEARS 2000- 2002**

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Adult learners by nature are achievement oriented. When the necessary conditions are present they perform well in their curricular activities. However, it has been found that different factors and conditions drive learner performance in varied manner even within the same programme of studies.<sup>1</sup> In a broader sense, performance failures eventually end up with learners giving up their studies abruptly. This is identified as 'attrition' in distance learning literature.<sup>2</sup> Attrition by nature is a complicated outcome of a long drawn process in which a series of conditions seemed to interfere with the interest and commitment of learners.<sup>3</sup> These factors include conditions intrinsic to the learner such as his/her age, gender, aptitudes, and motivation (personal factors) on the one hand and extrinsic factors such as family, community support (socio economic), and quantity and quality of institutional inputs on the other<sup>4</sup>.

The manner in which these factors influence learner behaviour is seen to be multi-directional and hence complex. In many situations each of these factors complement each other, generating either vicious or virtuous cycles. Thus in a given situation the influence of one set of factors can reinforce the effects of another to a greater degree. For instance, family income standards may enable a learner to plan out her learning activities, attend day schools and interact with his/ her peers and tutors regularly. On the contrary, there are situations in which an effect of one negative factor such as low income, negating even the positive influence of another factor such as commitment or aptitude. For instance it has been found that learners with superior entry qualifications fails to perform as expected particularly when other factors such as family support, teaching inputs, differential expectations, or economic hardships, undermine their sense of focus and attention to studies.

This study on attrition of learners following the Foundation Program in Social Sciences of the OUSL is conceived within the aforesaid context. The study is therefore focused on learner performance with special reference to attrition, which has been identified as a serious problem in Open Distance Learning. The authors of this paper monitored the performance levels of 93 students over a period of three semesters from 2001 to identify which among the series of personal, family, community, and institutional factors best explain learner behaviour of adult students. For this purpose learner profiles have been identified with a view to matching them against educational achievements of different categories of learner groups. Based on the profiles developed by the study the researchers have identified a number of typologies, which have strong bearing on the nature, and intensity of attrition. For instance, a factor such as maturity of students expressed in terms of age and work experience, language skills and previous educational achievements have been clustered together to produce a typology, which has shown a higher incidence of persistence within the sample. This finding was consistence with a number of other studies done elsewhere on learner performance.

The panel results have also helped the researchers to identify typologies of learners that are relatively vulnerable and hence require special attention. In the second part of the study an attempt was made to plot learner behaviour in relation to a number of key factors selected. For this a series of stepwise multiple regression analyses was done to identify which among the identified factors have contributed most to learner performance during this period. The analysis of data was done using SPSS package to ascertain the significance of each of the variables selected in explaining the level of learner achievement and/ or attrition.

Attrition as found in this study has its own costs to both learners and the educational providers. As for learners their effort and finances are wasted; their social standing may

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be undermined; and their esteem can at least be temporarily damaged. As for providers it adversely affect the internal efficiency and the image of the education provider. As word of mouth can spread faster; negative image arising from high attrition rates can sometimes be disastrous to the education provider. It can demoralize the current learners and put off potential learners from registering for programmes offered. The findings of this study therefore would help university to evolve a set of solutions capable of addressing the relative high attrition rates among learners following low level programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> Performance denotes learner's capacity to carry out educational pursuits. They include enrolment, persistence, completion and success.

<sup>2</sup> Among the authors who have commented on attrition are Garland (1993), Kember (1995), Verduin and Clark (1991).

<sup>3</sup> Siqueria de Freitas et al (1986) in particular has examined these conditions and processes and commented on them extensively.

<sup>4</sup> Garland (1993) and Bhalalusesa (2001) have regrouped the factors contributing to attrition into four broad groups that include situational, institutional, dispositional, and epistemological factors.