



## **STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE SHORT COURSE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA**

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Early childhood education is pivotal in shaping children's holistic development and future success. To address the needs of early childhood educators, caregivers, and parents, the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) introduced a short course in Early Childhood Development. This study explores student perceptions of the course, focusing on enrolment motivations, satisfaction with content and delivery, and additional support. A quantitative approach was employed using a structured Google form questionnaire completed by 100 respondents. Findings reveal a predominantly female cohort with a significant preference for English as the medium of instruction and a major representation of young adults aged 26-33 years. Geographic disparities in enrolment highlight the need for better information dissemination across Sri Lanka with the Western Province showing the highest enrolment, and the Northern and Uva Provinces the lowest. The findings underscore the critical role of factors such as course flexibility, curriculum content, and instructor quality in attracting and retaining students. The overwhelmingly positive ratings for lecturers and the course coordinator highlight their essential contributions to creating a supportive learning environment. Additionally, students expressed a desire for more diverse learning materials with a preference for supplementary reading materials, online discussion forums, and practical hands-on workshops. These preferences highlight the need to cater to varied learner preferences and enhance the overall learning experience. Overall, these insights provide valuable guidance for strategic improvements to the course. By addressing identified areas for enhancement, the course can better equip educators, caregivers, and parents with the skills and knowledge necessary to support early childhood development, ultimately benefiting young children.

Keywords: Supportive Learning Environment, Early Childhood Education, Learning Preferences

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Early childhood offers a critical window of opportunity to shape the trajectory of a child's holistic development and build a foundation for their future (Early Childhood Education, 2012). Recognising the crucial role of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in nurturing children's overall development, the department of Early Childhood and Primary Education at the Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) introduced a short course. This course is tailored to meet the needs of early childhood educators, caregivers, and parents, aiming to provide them with essential knowledge and skills to support children's growth during their early years. By focussing on enhancing participants' understanding of child development and their ability to create nurturing environments, the course covers various aspects of early childhood development through ten compulsory workshops. These workshops are conducted exclusively on weekends through an online platform and are available in the Sinhala, Tamil, and English medium. Early childhood development in various aspects, namely the moral aspects of religion, social-emotional, cognitive, motor, physical, language, art, and development in the golden period stages of life can determine the subsequent development (Astuti et al., 2020; Fakhriyani, 2016). Participants explore topics such as physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as language skills, creative arts abilities, and readiness for formal schooling. The study aims to explore student perceptions of the short course on Early Childhood Development (ECD) at OUSL. This exploration includes student perceptions on course enrolment, investigating factors that contribute to a surge in enrolment, and satisfaction with course content and delivery, and understanding the additional support required. By examining these aspects, this study endeavours to provide insights that can inform strategic decisions and improvements to ensure the continued effectiveness of the course in meet the evolving needs of participants in the field of Early Childhood Education.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a quantitative approach. Before data collection began, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experts. A structured Google questionnaire was employed to collect information from 140 individuals who had completed the short course on ECD. Of these, a 100 responses were received. The questionnaire comprised two main sections: the first section focused on demographic information, including age, gender, and geographic location, while the second section addressed aspects related to the course, such as student perspectives on course enrolment, satisfaction with course content and delivery, and additional supports required. The Google questionnaire link was shared via WhatsApp groups, and respondents were given a specified timeframe in which to complete and submit their responses. The data gathered from the Google questionnaire was analysed by importing it into Excel and then undergoing various calculations to derive percentages for different responses. Following this, bar graphs and pie charts were created to visually represent the distribution of responses across different categories. Additionally, pivot tables were utilised to further analyse and summarise the data, enabling a deeper exploration of trends and patterns within the dataset.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings from the structured questionnaire completed by the 100 students enrolled in the short course in ECD provided valuable insights into various aspects of student demographics, and perceptions regarding the course and their satisfaction with course delivery and support.



### 1. Student Demographic Profile:

#### Medium, Gender and Age

The following analysis presents the demographic profile of students, highlighting the key insights into language preference, age distribution, and gender representation.

**Table 01:**  
*Students' demographic profile*

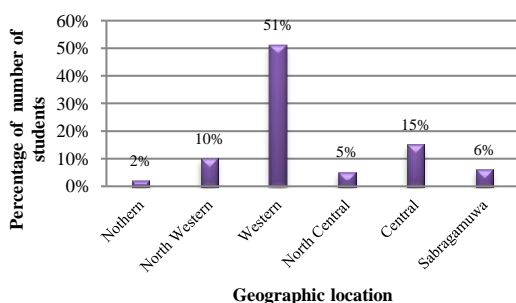
Gender	Age	Sinhala	Tamil	English	Total
Female	18-25	04	04	19	27%
	26-33	01	03	41	45%
	34-41	-	02	16	18%
	42-49	-	-	06	06%
	50-57	-	-	01	01%
	More than 57	-	-	01	01%
	Male	18-25	-	-	01
	26-33	-	-	01	01%
	34-41	-	-	-	-
	42-49	-	-	-	-
	50-57	-	-	-	-
	More than 57	-	-	-	-

Table 01 portrays a diverse student demographic profile characterised by several key attributes. Firstly, a notable preference for English as the medium of instruction is evidenced with 86% of respondents indicating it. This preference reflects the importance of language accessibility in catering to the needs of a diverse student body. Moreover, the majority of students fall within the age range of 26-33 years (41%), indicating a significant representation of young adults seeking further education and career advancement opportunities in the field of Early Childhood. Furthermore, the overwhelmingly female cohort (98%) highlights the prominent role of women in Early Childhood Education and caregiving roles.

#### Geographic location

Figure 01 indicates significant variations in student enrolment percentages across the different regions of Sri Lanka.

**Figure 1**  
*Students' geographic location*



The dispersion of student enrolment percentages across regions in Sri Lanka reveals significant disparities with the Western province notably leading at 51%. The Central and Sabragamuwa provinces follow with 15% and 6%, respectively, while the Northern and Uva regions exhibit the lowest enrolment at 2% and 1%. The North-western region stands at 10%, suggesting moderate



participation. The findings emphasise a critical issue: the insufficient dissemination of detailed information about this course across all regions of Sri Lanka. To address this gap, diverse strategies must be employed to ensure that course details reach every corner of the country.

## 2. Students’ perceptions on course enrolment

### Primary Information about the course

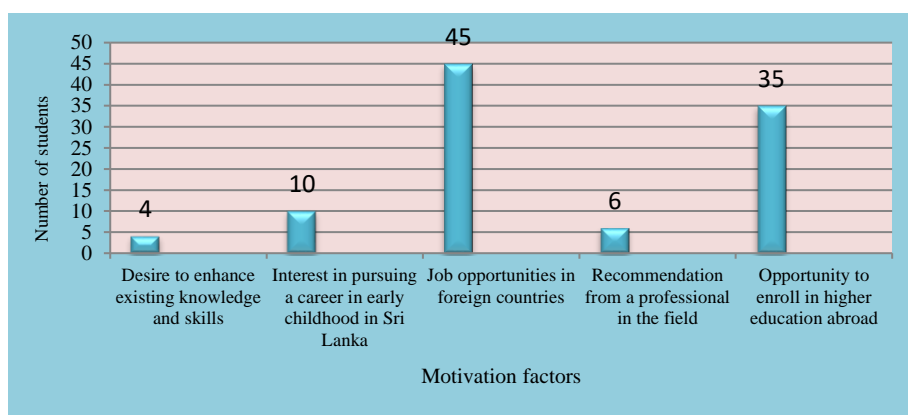
This study examined how people first found out about the course. University websites are the most prominent channel among the diverse primary information sources from which the respondents acquired information about the course (49%), followed by social media platforms at 30%. Moreover, 18% of the respondents relied on recommendations from friends and family, underscoring the influence of personal networks in educational decision making. These results emphasise the need for educational institutions to utilise a combination of online platforms, social networks, and word-of-mouth referrals to ensure the comprehensive dissemination of course information and maximise outreach to potential learners across various demographics.

### Motivational factors for enrolment

Positive motivation leads to higher completion rates. The findings of Lee et al. (2019) reveal a statistically significant positive correlation between positive motivation and positive engagement, as well as between negative motivation and negative engagement among learners. This underscores the importance of understanding the motivational factors driving learners’ inclination to complete such courses and how these motivations influence their level of engagement. The following analysis clarifies the diverse motivations driving student enrolment in the course.

**Figure 2**

*Motivation factors*



The reasons behind enrolment in the course vary among students; a significant number of students (45%) were drawn to the course because of the appeal of job opportunities abroad, highlighting the course’s relevance for international career prospects. Additionally, a segment of students (10%) expressed a specific interest in contributing to Early Childhood Education within Sri Lanka, reflecting a commitment to local community development. Furthermore, the opportunity to pursue higher education abroad motivates a significant portion of students (35%), indicating a desire for academic advancement and global learning experiences. Recommendations from professionals in the field also influence some students’ decisions (6%), underscoring the importance of mentorship in guiding educational pathways. These diverse motivations underscore the multifaceted appeal of the course, catering to various career aspirations and personal growth objectives among students. These findings resonate with the findings of Lee et al. (2019).

## 3. Course appeal and enrolment process

To make the learning experience better, it’s important to know what makes people want to join a course and what challenges they face when signing up. This helps improve how courses are



designed and how easy it is for people to enrol. The survey revealed that among the participants, the most appealing aspect of the course varied. Nearly half the respondents (46%) favoured the duration and flexibility of the course, indicating a strong preference for adaptable learning schedules. Additionally, 35% of participants found the curriculum content most appealing, emphasising the importance of engaging and relevant course materials. Although a smaller proportion (19%) cited the reputation of the instructors as their primary appeal, it underscores the significance of instructor credibility in attracting students. Notably, no respondents selected “Other” as their most appealing aspect, indicating clear preferences among the provided options. Overall, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of the appeal of the course with factors like flexibility, curriculum content, and instructor reputation all playing essential roles in attracting students to enrol.

Moreover, understanding the challenges encountered during the enrolment process is crucial for enhancing the overall experience for students. A majority of respondents (84%) experienced a smooth and hassle-free enrolment process, reflecting positively on the administrative procedures. However, 10% encountered technical issues with the online registration portal, suggesting a need for improvements in digital infrastructure. Additionally, 6% faced difficulty in accessing relevant information, underscoring the importance of clear communication channels regarding course details and enrolment procedures.

#### 4. Perception of course fee and enrolment financing method

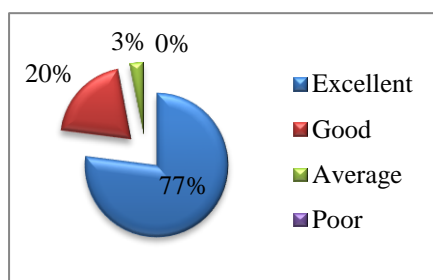
The perception of course fees and methods of enrolment financing are integral components shaping students’ decisions to enrol in a course. The survey reveals a highly positive perception of the course fee, with 97% of respondents finding it reasonable considering the content and duration of the course. Remarkably, there were no negative responses. This suggests a strong consensus among participants regarding the fairness and affordability of the fee structure, highlighting its alignment with student expectations and ensuring accessibility to a diverse student body. Most students finance their enrolment in the course through personal savings (56%) and family support (43%). This underscores the importance of financial preparedness and familial assistance in enabling students to pursue their educational goals. However, the limited utilisation of scholarships (1%) suggests potential areas for expanding financial aid opportunities to alleviate the financial strain on students and promote greater inclusivity in education. Overall, these findings emphasise the significance of financial support mechanisms in facilitating student participation and success in higher education.

#### 5. Perceptions of course delivery and support

Assessing the quality of lecturers and evaluating students’ satisfaction with the support provided by the course coordinator are essential aspects of understanding students’ learning experiences and overall satisfaction with a course. Ariadurai and Manohanthan (2008) stressed the importance of improving support for learners. In their study, they also noted that it is essential for both academic and administrative staff at OUSL to work towards creating a more proactive and nurturing learning atmosphere for students. In this survey, participants were asked to rate both the quality of the lecturer and their satisfaction with the course coordinator based on their experiences.

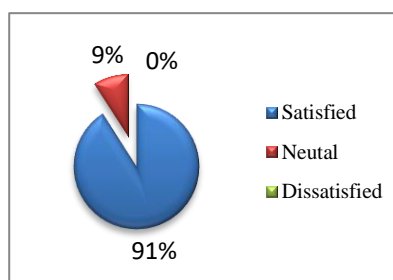
**Figure 03**

*Quality of lecturer*



**Figure 04**

*Satisfaction with course coordinator support*





The survey results revealed a high level of satisfaction among students regarding both the quality of the lecturer and the support provided by the course coordinator. Rahman (2013) emphasises the pivotal role of lecturers' positive behaviour and teaching habits in influencing students' academic achievement and learning outcomes. The findings of the study align with this literature, as the majority of respondents rated the quality of lecturers as "excellent" (77%) or "good" (20%), attributing this to effective teaching methods, clear communication, and engaging delivery. The absence of any "poor" ratings underscores a consistent standard of excellence among lecturers, highlighting the critical importance of competent and skilled educators in enhancing education quality and fostering student satisfaction. Holmstrom and Stjarnhagen (2023) explore the relationship between course coordination and student satisfaction with university studies, finding a significant impact of coordination on student contentment and appreciation. Their research underscores the importance of effective coordination in enhancing students' experiences within university programs. In this study, a notably high level of satisfaction with the course coordinator was observed with 91% expressing satisfaction. The overwhelmingly positive ratings underscore the effectiveness of course coordinators in addressing student needs and fostering a supportive learning environment.

## **6. Additional resources and support**

Understanding students' preferences for additional resources or support during a course is essential for enhancing their learning experiences and overall satisfaction. In this survey, participants were asked to provide feedback on the types of resources or support they would like to see offered during the course. Analysing these responses provides insights into areas where additional support may be beneficial in facilitating students' learning and engagement. The survey results indicate that participants expressed a desire for various additional resources or support during the course. The most commonly requested resource was access to supplementary reading materials, with 43% of respondents indicating a preference for this option. Online discussion forums were also highly favoured with 37% of participants expressing a desire for such platforms. Practical hands-on workshops were mentioned by 15% of respondents while a smaller proportion (5%) expressed interest in having access to session recordings. Overall, these findings emphasise the importance of providing diverse and accessible resources to meet the varied learning needs of students and promote a comprehensive learning experience.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study offers comprehensive insights into student perceptions and experiences regarding the short course on early childhood development at OUSL. Through a quantitative approach, data from 100 students who completed the course revealed diverse demographics, motivations for enrolment, and satisfaction levels with course content and delivery. The findings underscore the importance of effective communication strategies for disseminating course information, as well as the pivotal role of factors such as course flexibility, curriculum content, and instructor quality in attracting and retaining students. Moreover, the overwhelmingly positive ratings for lecturers and the course coordinator highlight their crucial contributions to fostering a supportive learning environment. Additionally, students' preferences for additional resources emphasise the importance of providing diverse learning materials to meet the varied needs of learners. Overall, these insights inform strategic decisions aimed at enhancing the course's effectiveness to meet the evolving needs of participants in the field of Early Childhood Education.



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