



PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENT TEACHERS ON ACADEMIC SUPPORT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES

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Academic support services are critical to student success in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), especially in teacher education programmes where learners often handle multiple responsibilities. This study explores how students in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) and Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programs at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) perceive the academic support they receive. This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of current support services and identify areas requiring improvement. Using a survey approach, data were gathered from 474 student teachers representing both Sinhala and Tamil mediums through an online questionnaire. The instrument covered six key academic support areas: academic counselling, day school sessions, assessment feedback, self-learning materials, mentoring during teaching practice, and online learning support. Overall, the results reflect a generally positive student experience. Most participants appreciated the structure and consistency of day schools (85%) and valued the mentoring support during teaching practice (83%). Assessment feedback was seen as constructive by 73% of respondents. However, the findings also pointed to clear gaps. A notable portion of students (20%) felt they did not receive adequate counselling during registration. Additionally, 21% found the self-learning materials insufficient for independent learning, and 27% reported technical difficulties using the OUSL's online learning management system. A significant number of neutral responses (32%) on services like welfare counselling indicated a lack of awareness rather than indifference. The study recommends improving access to academic counselling, especially at the point of registration, ensuring consistent mentor training across programs, and upgrading the online platform to reduce technical issues. These targeted improvements can enhance the effective learning experience and support student retention in ODL settings, specially related to teacher education programmes.

Keywords: open and distance learning, academic support services, student perceptions, teacher education, Open University of Sri Lanka, learner engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) represents a transformative paradigm in higher education, designed to provide flexible and inclusive learning opportunities to diverse student populations. The Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) offers a diverse range of programmes, from short courses to doctoral degrees. Among these, the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) in Natural Sciences and the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) are important teacher education programmes. These Programmes are offered in all three media and supported by well-established administrative and academic support systems to ensure student success. Academic learner support, encompassing services such as academic counselling, interactive learning sessions, assessment feedback, self-learning materials, teaching practice, mentoring, and online learning support, is pivotal in fostering student engagement, retention, and academic achievement in the ODL context. Despite the critical role of these services, there is a need to systematically evaluate their effectiveness from the perspective of students to identify strengths, address gaps, and enhance the overall learning experience. This study investigates the nature and efficacy of academic learner support within OUSL's BEd and PGDE programmes, focusing on student perceptions to inform improvements in the academic support framework. The BEd and PGDE programmes in the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education offer structured support, including academic counselling, interactive sessions, and online platforms. However, student perceptions of these services and their alignment with academic needs remain underexplored. This study's findings will help enhance existing learner support in teacher education programmes to better meet student needs and improve the ODL experience. The purpose of this study is to examine the students' perspectives on the academic learner support services in promoting student success within the BEd and PGDE programs at the Open University of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the following objectives were formulated:

1. To find out the core academic learner support services provided to students enrolled in the BEd and PGDE programmes at OUSL.
2. To examine student perceptions regarding the effectiveness of academic learner support services in the BEd and PGDE programmes at OUSL.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Learner support services play a pivotal role in enhancing student success, engagement, and retention in ODL systems. Several studies conducted across



different regions highlight the diversity and common challenges in supporting distance learners.

Zuhairi et al., (2020) conducted a comparative study of learner support systems at the OUSL and Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia. Their research underscores the importance of structured instructional design, learner engagement strategies, the use of Open Educational Resources (OER), and robust quality assurance frameworks in improving student outcomes. Despite contextual differences, both institutions face challenges in scaling student support and integrating technology for effective online learning.

In Brazil, Duran et al. (2014) examined learner support facilities under the Open University System, highlighting how regional disparities and evaluation mechanisms affect system efficiency. While coordinators had relevant professional experience, rigid assessment practices limited optimisation efforts. The study emphasizes the need for improved cyber-infrastructure and collaborative evaluation methods to strengthen the ODL support.

Rehman and Shahzadi (2025) compared learner support systems in Pakistan's Virtual University (VU) and Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), revealing that VU's digital model excels in scalability but suffers from poor connectivity and reduced personal interaction. AIOU's hybrid model offers inclusivity but is hindered by inconsistent resource allocation. The authors recommend an integrated hybrid approach to address both accessibility and engagement challenges.

In addition, Ndege et al. (2023) in Kenya found a strong positive relationship between academic support services and student retention. Key services like course material provision, tutorials, and mentorship were significant predictors of retention. However, the absence of impactful advisory and feedback systems points to areas needing strategic intervention.

In Nigeria, Okopi and Ogunleye (2016) assessed learner support services in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). While students perceived support services more positively than staff, deficiencies were noted in areas such as learner follow-up, feedback systems, and facilitation. The study advocates for continuous assessment and improvement of learner support infrastructure.

Lastly, Gujjar, Chaudhry, and Chaudhry (2009) compared AIOU and OUSL, concluding that OUSL offered better overall and regional office services. However, both institutions were similar in their tutorial, counselling, and media support services. The study recommends that AIOU strengthen its regional infrastructure, guidance services, and tutor training to improve the effectiveness of student support.

Collectively, these studies confirm that well-designed learner support systems—tailored to the local context are essential for ensuring equitable access, learner satisfaction, and academic achievement in teacher education programmes in ODL. The literature also reveals persistent challenges in infrastructure, staff training, interactivity, and evaluation processes, all of which must be addressed to optimize the ODL delivery.



METHODOLOGY

The study employed a survey research design to investigate learner academic support within Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programs. The target population comprised students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (BED) in Natural Sciences and the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), offered in Sinhala and Tamil mediums. Voluntary sampling was used to select participants, yielding a sample of 474 students, with 238 from the Sinhala medium and 236 from the Tamil medium. Of these, 469 were PGDE students, with the remainder from the BEd Natural Sciences program. Data was collected through an online questionnaire focusing on six key areas of academic support: Academic Counselling, Day School/Interactive Learning Sessions, Assessment Feedback, Modules/Study Guides or Self-Learning Materials, Teaching Practice and Mentoring, and Online Learning Support. The questionnaire was structured to capture students' perceptions and experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of academic support in the teacher education programmes in ODL context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Academic Counselling

According to Table 1, the findings indicate a significant majority of learners (76.4%) acknowledged receiving orientation about the curriculum and courses prior to the commencement of their program. Furthermore, 62.7% reported awareness of academic counselling services provided by the faculty, and 73.6% felt confident in discussing course-related issues with academic counsellors. These responses suggest that the communication and support mechanisms available through counselling services were largely effective. However, a notable 20.1% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction regarding the adequacy of counselling services during registration or add/drop (courses) periods, pointing to a gap in timely academic support. Additionally, 31.6% of learners selected the neutral option regarding access to student welfare counselling, indicating potential ambiguity or limited awareness of such services.

Table 1

Academic counselling

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
I received an orientation about the curriculum and courses before starting the program.	2.7	4.6	14.5	41.8	34.6
I am aware of the academic counselling services provided by the faculty.	2.3	3.8	31.2	47.5	15.2
I can discuss course changes, registration, and academic issues with counsellors.	3.0	4.2	19.2	46.4	27.2
Student welfare counselling is available when needed.	3.0	5.9	31.6	41.8	17.7
Academic counselling does not adequately address my needs during registration/add-drop periods.	22.4	30.1	27.4	14.6	5.5



Day School /Interactive Learning Sessions

Table 2 shows students' views about their on-site classes. Participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the planning and execution of day school sessions. Specifically, 81% agreed that the academic year timetable was shared at the beginning of the program, and 85.2% confirmed that sessions were conducted as scheduled. In terms of instructional quality, 72.8% of respondents believed lecturers effectively clarified student doubts during these sessions.

Table 2

Day School / Interactive Learning Sessions

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
The academic year timetable is provided at the beginning of the program.	3.6	4.6	10.8	35.6	45.4
Day school sessions are conducted as scheduled.	2.7	3.6	8.4	36.3	48.9
Lecturers clarify doubts effectively during day school sessions.	2.0	4.9	20.3	41.4	31.4
Feedback about day schools is collected from students for improvements.	2.5	9.7	24.9	38.4	24.5
My doubts are not fully addressed during day schools.	20.0	26.4	33.3	15.6	4.6

Nonetheless, 20.2% of learners indicated that their doubts were not fully addressed, and 24.9% responded neutrally about whether feedback from students was actively collected for session improvement. These findings highlight a need for improved mechanisms for formative feedback and follow-up actions based on learner input.

Assessment Feedback

Table 3 shows about assessment feedback given to the students. Learners generally reported positive experiences with assessment-related support. Approximately 73.4% agreed that the feedback they received was helpful in enhancing their academic performance, and 69.8% believed it was sufficiently detailed and actionable for future learning.

Table 3

Assessment feedback

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Assignment instructions are clear, and valid late submissions are accepted	9.3	15.0	28.1	35.2	12.4
Assessment feedback helps me improve my performance.	1.5	5.3	19.8	47.9	25.5
Feedback is detailed and actionable for future learning.	2.3	5.7	22.2	45.1	24.7



Feedback is provided within a reasonable timeframe.	2.3	5.9	26.8	47.0	17.9
I rarely receive useful feedback on my assignments	17.1	33.1	29.7	16.0	4.0

Additionally, 64.9% affirmed that feedback was provided within a reasonable timeframe. However, only 47.6% agreed that assignment instructions were clear and that valid late submissions were accepted, indicating variability in assessment guidance. Furthermore, 20% of respondents stated that they rarely received useful feedback, underscoring potential inconsistencies in assessment practices across courses or tutors.

Modules and Self-Learning Materials

According to Table 4, more than half of the participants agreed that self-instructional materials were well-structured (52.3%), relevant (57.8%), and enriched with supplementary resources (64.4%). Open Educational Resources (OERs) were also regarded as beneficial, with 64.5% acknowledging their value in supporting self-directed learning. Nevertheless, 21.3% of learners disagreed that the modules effectively facilitated independent study, and 31.2% provided neutral responses regarding the structure and clarity of the materials. These findings suggest a need to review the content design and presentation strategies to ensure they align with the principles of self-regulated learning in open and distance education.

Table 4

Modules or Self-Learning Materials

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Course materials such as study guides and modules are well-structured and easy to understand.	6.8	9.7	31.2	35.8	16.5
Modules /study guides are designed effectively for independent study in ODL.	4.4	11.4	28.5	40.1	15.6
The content in the study guide /modules is relevant and suitable for distance learners.	4.0	8.2	30.0	39.7	18.1
Modules/study guides include additional resources to enhance learning.	4.0	5.3	26.3	46.0	18.4
OER (Open Educational Resources) in study guides are helpful for self-learning.	3.8	4.9	26.8	45.5	19.0
Modules do not adequately support independent learning.	16.7	32.7	29.3	16.2	5.1

Teaching Practice and Mentoring

Teaching practice support emerged as a key strength in the academic support system. According to Table 5, a substantial proportion of respondents reported receiving regular mentoring support (83.1%) and noted that classroom observations by supervisors contributed to the enhancement of their teaching skills (84.6%).



Table 5
Teaching Practice & Mentoring

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
I receive regular mentoring support during teaching practice.	1.7	3.0	12.2	38.6	44.5
Classroom observations by supervisors improve my teaching skills.	1.7	3.4	10.3	41.6	43.0
Workshops conducted by the faculty prepare me adequately for teaching practice.	1.9	4.2	11.4	38.4	44.1
I am assigned a school mentor to support my teaching practice.	4.6	5.7	12.7	44.3	32.7
Mentor training workshops are conducted for guidance.	19.0	22.8	19.4	28.0	10.8
Mentoring during teaching practice is not sufficiently structured.	9.3	22.2	25.3	27.6	15.6

Furthermore, 82.5% agreed that preparatory workshops organized by the faculty were helpful. However, only 38.8% positively acknowledged the conduct of mentor training workshops, while 43.2% expressed dissatisfaction, implying a need for standardized mentor training. Additionally, 43.2% of learners believed that mentoring during teaching practice lacked sufficient structure, pointing to inconsistencies in the mentoring experience.

Online Learning Support

According to Table 6, findings on online learning support indicated a moderate level of satisfaction. A majority of respondents (63%) reported that the Open University Learning Management System (OULMS) provided easy access to course materials and updates. Similarly, 62.2% felt that online platforms facilitated effective communication with tutors and peers, and 59.1% agreed that lecturers provided timely feedback on online learning activities. Despite these strengths, 27% of participants reported experiencing technical difficulties in accessing materials via OULMS. Furthermore, 26.8% responded neutrally to the inclusion of engaging activities in online courses, suggesting a need for more interactive content and robust technical support services.

Table 6
Online Learning Support

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
OULMS provides easy access to course materials and updates.	3.6	6.8	26.6	42.4	20.6
Online platforms enable effective communication with tutors/peers.	2.7	7.4	27.6	40.9	21.3
Online courses include engaging activities.	3.8	11.2	26.8	38.6	19.6



Lecturers provide timely feedback on online activities.	3.6	9.9	27.4	38.2	20.9
I face technical difficulties accessing online materials/OULMS.	22.7	28.1	22.2	19.0	8.0

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall analysis reveals that academic support services in teacher education programmes in the open and distance learning context are largely effective in key areas such as day schools, mentoring, and assessment feedback. Nonetheless, several areas need attention, including the structuring of mentoring programs, enhancement of self-learning materials for independent study, and mitigation of technical barriers in online learning environments. Addressing these challenges through systematic planning and learner-centered improvements can significantly enhance the academic experience and outcomes of distance learners in teacher education programmes. Finally, the following measures are proposed to improve the academic support system for learners in OUSL's BEd and PGDE programs,

- **Improve Academic Counselling Accessibility:** Ensure timely academic counselling, especially during key periods like registration and add/drop period.
- **Strengthen Day School Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement systematic processes to collect, analyze, and act on student feedback to resolve queries and improve instructional quality.
- **Standardize Assessment Practices:** Provide clear assignment guidelines and ensure feedback is prompt, detailed, and constructive to support learning.
- **Enhance Self-Learning Materials:** Redesign modules and study guides to promote independent learning, integrating interactive elements and supplementary resources aligned with ODL principles.
- **Establish Consistent Mentoring Structures:** Introduce standardized mentor training and clear protocols to ensure high-quality support during teaching practice.
- **Strengthening Online Learning Infrastructure:** Improve the reliability of OULMS and incorporate interactive content to enhance engagement in online learning.

These recommendations aim to address current gaps, creating a more responsive and learner-centered support system that improves student engagement, retention, and academic success in OUSL's ODL in teacher education programmes.

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