A Comparison of Some Background Characteristics of Students Who Have Completed and Not Completed the Foundation Programme in Social Studies

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Low rates of completion of study programmes are related to a variety of factors including backgrounds of students such as sex, age and previous education. Although some studies have compiled student profiles for selected study programmes at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), no research has been carried out to establish relationships between student profiles and academic performance. This paper presents the findings of a pioneering study, which compares the selected background characteristics of students with their levels of academic success. Information on social backgrounds and academic performance is obtained from the application forms and the OUSL examination records respectively. The similarities and differences between those who completed the study programme and those who could not complete it are examined using percentages, averages and two statistical measures of relationship, namely lambda and gamma. The study found that those who come from urban areas and aged between 40 to 55 years had a higher rate of completion. The study has many implications for the OUSL in terms of academic support to be granted to high-risk students.

Introduction

The Department of Social Studies of the Open University of Sri Lanka introduced its Foundation Programme in Social Studies in 1991 for providing university education for those who do not have the required G.C.E. (A/L) passes to enter diploma level or undergraduate study programmes. It provides introductory knowledge in the basic concepts and principles of Modern Sri Lankan History, Geography, Economics, Political Science and Management. A course on English for Social Studies is also offered for improvement of English language skills. Those who pass these compulsory courses can follow the BA Degree in Social Sciences or the Diploma in Management Programmes. They also gain eligibility to apply for the undergraduate programme in law.

The only entry qualification to this study programme is the ability to read and write in a vernacular language and to be over 18 years of age at the time of registration. The low rate of completion of the study programme from 1992 to 1998 has been identified as a key problem and this study was designed to investigate the problem. The objectives of the study were:

- To identify some background characteristics of students who were enrolled in the programme in its first three academic years, 1991, 1992 and 1993.

- To ascertain the number of students who completed the study programme and those who could not complete it within a reasonable period of time, at least four years.

- To examine the similarities and differences of background characteristics of those who completed the study programme and those who could not complete it within a reasonable period of time.

- To establish the significant relationships between the student characteristics and levels of academic performance.

Methodology

Sample

A sample of 250 students registered in the first three academic years, 1991, 1992 and 1993 were randomly selected representing about one-third of the total student population in each academic year.

Table 1: Sample size

Year	Student population	Sample	Percentage
1991/92	129	40	31
1992/93	331	106	32
1993/94	314	104	33
Total	774	250	32

Data Sources

Background characteristics

Students' application forms provided information on a number of background characteristics but only five such characteristics were selected for the following reasons.

- A wide range of studies done in Western countries as well as in Sri Lanka has concentrated on three main types of factors namely, (i) personal characteristics of the student such as sex, age, ethnicity, and marital status, (ii) occupation and previous educational background of the student and (iii) characteristics associated with the university itself such as the types of courses offered (Woodley et al. 1992,. Johnes and Taylor. 1989, Garner and McPherson. 1990, Williams. 1986, and Jayatilleke et al. 1997).

- The selection of five background characteristics is based on common variables used in a number of studies.

- A great variety of factors can be related to academic performance but a preliminary study such as this can explain only a few factors.

The academic progress of each student was examined from the OUSL records of examination results. Since the sample student population was drawn from all those who registered for the programme in 1991, 1992 and 1993, and had different levels of academic performance including some students who chose very early to leave the university, academic performance was measured using the terms 'completion' and 'non-completion', (completers and non-completers) for two main reasons given by Woodley et al. (1992). Firstly, non-completion is an all-inclusive term. Many students leave university because of failed examinations, poor health, financial difficulties, dissatisfaction with the study programme, occupational changes etc. Secondly, it is a neutral term indicating non-completion as an option to leave university due to a variety of reasons rather than attempt to complete the programme.

It is also important to consider the number of years taken to complete a study programme in a distance education university. For example, the Foundation Programme in Social Studies is designed for an average student to complete in two years under normal conditions. However, if a student is employed or faced with domestic problems he/she can opt to take one credit in an academic year and complete it in four years. Also, a student may postpone his/her studies half way through due to occupational or other problems and then continue studies later. Therefore, it is difficult to take a fixed period of time to assess the basic level of academic performance, i.e., completion and non-completion. However, for the purpose of this study we considered it reasonable to assume a student would like to complete foundation courses within at least 4 years in order to enter diploma or undergraduate programmes.

The academic progress of each student in the sample was checked over at least four years to determine whether he/she has successfully completed the study programme or not. The number of years considered was six, five and four for those registered in 1991, 1992 and 1993 respectively.

Data Analysis

The similarities and differences of the selected background characteristics of completers and non-completers were compared using percentages, and

the relationships between background characteristics and performance were tested using lambda and gamma coefficients.

Findings

1. Background Characteristics

Sex

Table 2 presents the classification of sample students by sex.

Table 2: Classification of Sample by Sex

Sex	Number	Percentage
Male	164	66
Female	86	34
Total	250	100

Source: Survey Data, OUSL, 1998.

The percentage of male participation was higher (66%). A survey conducted in 1997 also revealed that in a sample of 285 students in the Foundation Programme in Social Studies who responded to a survey questionnaire, the percentage of males was 60.4% (Jayatilleke et al, 1997, p. 67).

Age

Table 3 presents age group distribution of the sample students.

Table 3: Classification of Sample by Age Group

Age Group	Number	Percentage
18 – 25 years	75	30
26 – 35 years	78	31
36 – 45 years	59	24
46 – 55 years	28	11
Above 56 years	10	04
Total	250	100

Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

The above table shows that a higher percentage of students in the sample belong to the two age groups of 18-25 years and 26-35 years (61%). The median age is 32 years. The participation of students aged between 18-35 was 61% and more than one-third of the students were older students, above 36 years age.

Pre-OUSL academic background

The previous educational qualifications, i.e. academic performance at the G.C.E. (A/L) Examination is considered to be related to academic success in university education. Table 4 gives previous educational qualifications.

Table 4: Classification of Sample by Previous Educational Qualifications

Type of educational qualifications	Number	Percentage
No formal educational qualifications	20	08
G.C.E. (O/L) passed (at least 5 subjects)	176	70
G.C.E. (A/L) one or two subjects passed	54	22
Total	250	100

Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

Only 22% of the students in the sample had passed one or two subjects at G.C.E. (A/L) Examination prior to entering the study programme.

Residence

Table 5 presents the districts of permanent residence of students immediately prior to entering university.

Table 5: Classification of Sample by the District of Residence

District	Number	Percentage
Colombo	144	58
Kandy	35	14
Matara	13	05
Kurunegala	13	05
Other districts	45	18
Total	250	100

Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

More than half of the students had their permanent residences in Colombo district where the OUSL main campus and the Colombo Regional Centre are located. The two other districts with regional centres, Kandy and Matara, had attracted only 19% of the sample. In addition to the above, all other districts of permanent residence had less than 10% of students.

The type of residence was also classified in terms of urban areas (Municipal Councils and Urban Councils) and rural areas (Pradeshiya Sabhas). The following table gives the classification of residence in terms of urban and rural areas.

Table 6: Classification of Places of Residences by Urban and Rural Areas

Residence	Number	Percentage
Urban	85	34
Rural	148	59
Not known*	17	07
Total	250	100

Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.
* Students who registered under their work place addresses.

About one-third of the students were living in urban areas in which the three regional centres and a number of study centres are located.

Until 1994, the Foundation Programme in Social Studies was conducted only in English and Sinhala media. Table 7 gives the numbers and percentages of sample students who followed the study programme in two media.

Table 7: Classification of Sample by Medium of Study

Medium of Study	Number	Percentage
Sinhala	190	76
English	60	24
Total	250	100

Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

The medium of study for about one-fourth of the sample was English according to Table 7.

2. Academic Performance

Table 8 presents the numbers and percentages of students who had completed the study programme and those who could not complete it within 4 years of registration.

Table 8: Classification of Sample by Academic Performance

Performance	1991/92 n=40	1992/93 n=106	1993/94 n=104	Total n=250
Completers				
(a) 2 years	16	27	23	66
(b) 3 years	5	7	2	14
(c) 4-6 years	2	2	1	5
Total	23	36	26	85
% of the sample	57.5	34	24	34
Non-completers				
Total	17	70	78	165
% of the sample	42.5	66	76	66

Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

Table 8 shows that 66% of the students registered in 1991, 1992 and 1993 were not able to complete the study programme. Also the number of non-completers was higher for the third batch of students and the lowest was reported for the first batch. Table 9 gives the level of academic performance of non-completers.

Of the 165 students who could not complete the study programme, 51 (31%) failed only the *English for Social Studies* course. Among these 51 students, 37 (73%) were male; 49 (96%) followed the study programme in the Sinhala medium; 23 (43%) were aged between 18-25 years and lived in mainly rural areas (94%). At the other extreme, two categories of students decided to discontinue university education for non-academic reasons. One could not gain eligibility due to non-submission of assignments and the other decided not to sit the final examination even after gaining eligibility.

Table 9: Classification of Non-completers by Levels of Academic Performance

Level of Academic Performance	Number	Percentage
Early drop-outs	15	09
Gained eligibility and did not sit the final examination	16	10
Passed 1 or 2 social science courses	36	22
Passed 3 social science courses	30	18
Passed 4 social science courses	17	10
Passed 5 social science courses	51	31
Total	165	100

Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

One issue of importance is the high rate of failure in the English for Social Studies course. Of 165 students who could not complete the study programme, 51 students (30%) were able to pass all the social science courses except the English course. The survey has revealed that these students were weak in English.

3. Comparison of Background Characteristics of Completers with Non-completers and Relationship between Background Characteristics and Performance

Sex

Table 10 shows the sex differences between completers and non-completers.

Table 10: Classification of Completers and Non-completres by sex

Completion/Non-completion	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Completed	57	35	28	33	85	34
Not completed	107	65	58	67	165	66
Total	164	100	86	100	250	100

Lambda = .05
Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

There is no significant difference in the percentage of completion between male and female students. Lambda coefficient is .05. However, some studies done in the British universities found that female students were slightly more successful than male students (Johnes and Taylor. 1989, Johnes. 1990 and Woodley et al. 1992).

Age on Entry and Completion / Non-completion

Table 11 shows the percentages of completion and non-completion for the five age groups.

Table 11: Classification of completers and non-completers by age

Completion/ Non-completion	18-25 years		26-35 years		36-45 years		46-55 years		56 & above		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Completed	24	32	19	24	21	36	13	46	08	80	85	34
Not completed	51	68	59	76	38	64	15	54	02	20	165	66
Total	75	100	78	100	59	100	28	100	10	100	250	100

Gamma = 0.22
Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998

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From the age group 36-45 years onwards there is an increase in the percentage of completion indicating that older students were more successful than younger students. The gamma co-efficient of 0.22 indicates a positive and somewhat significant relationship.

Pre-OUSL Academic Background and Completion / Non-completion

It was found that academic performance may be related to previous educational background, particularly during the first year of studies (Johnes. 1990). The following table indicates the previous educational qualifications of completers and non-completers.

Table 12: Classification of Completers and Non-completers by Pre-OUSL Academic Background

Completion/Non-completion	No formal educational qualifications		G.C.E. (O/L)		G.C.E. (A/L)		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Completed	06	30	64	36	15	28	85	34
Not completed	14	70	112	64	39	72	165	66
Total	20	100	176	100	54	100	250	100

Gamma = -.01 Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

There is no significant difference in academic success in terms of completion of the study between those who have passed one or two subjects at the G.C.E. (A/L) Examination and those who had no formal educational qualifications. However, it appears that academic success may be related to the grades obtained, the time of obtaining the academic qualification, relevance of subjects studied and other academic training received after leaving school.

Place of Residence and Completion / Non-completion

Table 13 presents the place of residence of completers and non-completers.

Table 13: Classification of Completers and Non-completers by their Places of Residence

Completion/Non-completion	Rural		Urban		Not indicated		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Completed	34	23	47	56	04	24	85	34
Not completed	114	77	38	44	13	76	165	66
Total	148	100	85	100	17	100	250	100

Gamma = .43
Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

According to Table 13, students who were living in urban areas showed the lowest percentage of non-completion (44%) and the gamma coefficient of .43 indicates that a somewhat significant relationship exists between the urban and rural background of students and the completion of the courses. It is possible that this degree of variation between the two student groups can be due to the travel distance between the place of residence to the nearest regional centre/study centre. Table 14 gives the distance from the places of residences of completers and non-completers.

Table 14: Classification of Completers and Non-Completers by the Distance from the Places of Residence to the Nearest Study Centres

Completion/ Non-completion	<25 km		26-50 km		56-100 km		>100 km		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	C	No.	%	No.	%
Completed	46	49	21	25	12	32	06	25	85	34
Not completed	48	51	64	75	26	68	27	75	165	66
Total	94	100	85	100	38	100	33	100	250	100

Gamma = .21
Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

As shown in Table 14, as the distance from the place of residence to the nearest study centre increases the percentage of completion has decreased from 49% to 25%. Gamma coefficient of .21 indicates a positive relationship between the two variables.

Medium of Study and Completion / Non-completion

The following table compares the medium of study between completers and non-completers.

Table 15: Classification of Completers and Non-completers by Medium of Study

Completion / Non-completion	English		Sinhala		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Completed	30	50	55	29	85	34
Not completed	30	50	135	71	165	66
Total	60	100	190	100	250	100

Gamma = .43
Source: Survey data, OUSL, 1998.

Table 15 shows that students who followed the programme in English medium had a higher percentage of completion (50%) as compared with the Sinhala medium students (29%). The amount of relationship between the medium of study and academic performance is high as indicated in the gamma coefficient of .43.

Discussion

This study provides crucial information about the selected background characteristics of students and their academic performance. There are significant differences between students' characteristics and their academic success. Students who enrolled in the study programme in its first three academic years were largely males (66%), aged between 18 to 35 years (61%), had passed G.C.E. (O/L) Examination (70%), rural based in terms of residence (60%) and the medium of study was Sinhala (76%). Although the majority of students attracted to the course belonged to the above category, the study shows that those who had completed the study programme were predominately aged between 36 to 55 years (45%), living in urban areas (56%) and followed the study programme in English medium (50%) as compared with the overall percentage of completion (34%).

This raises the issue of the type of assistance that OUSL ought to provide them. In 1995, the Foundation Programme in Social Studies was re-structured allowing the weaker students to take more than two years to pass the English course. Raheem and Ratwatte (1997, p.15) found that the largest proportion of students fall into the Beginners level (38%) and Part I (41%) categories in social science programmes and that a maximum of 3 years and 2 years are required to pass the English language course.

The time allotted for passing this course was only one year (Level 2) prior to 1995. Thus, the Beginners level students need a great deal of assistance and a minimum of 3 years for the completion of the study programme. The success of a distance education programme depends on the ability of the university to cater to such specific needs of high-risk students who are rural based.

It is also interesting to note how the younger students, aged between 18 to 25 years (30%) performed better in the distance mode of learning than the mature and older students. The majority of younger students had entered the OUSL within 3 to 4 years of leaving school. Out of the 51 students who passed all the social science courses, except English, 22 (43%) belonged to this age group (18-25 years) demonstrating low proficiency in English. The re-structured programme after 1995 could have had a direct impact on their academic performance. This may only be a part of the solution and academic guidance and counseling are also necessary for such less proficient students to developed as good self-learners.

The study programme has provided the opportunity for higher male participation (66%). However there was no difference in completion of the study programme between males and females (Table 10). The study enables us to identify high-risk student group profiles. It was largely the young male students coming from rural areas who had low percentages of completion. However, a complete database of student profiles including other factors such as types of occupation, marital status, health problems etc. which may influence non-completion, would enable further investigate into the relationship between student background characteristics and academic performance. It is also important to compare the situation before and after restructuring the study programme in 1995 because the university has already taken some steps to support the high-risk students.

In conclusion, this study found that those who come from urban areas and aged between 40-55 years had a higher rate of completion. The study programme was restructured in 1995, also to provide more academic support for high risk students and therefore it will be useful in a future study to further investigate the rate of completion of studies between high risk students and low risk students.

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