

**AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF STUDENT ATTRITION AND COMPLETION OF
DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES OF IGNOU**

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ABSTRACT

Student attrition and completion rate (during 1994-2000) of two distance education programmes (Postgraduate Diploma in Distance Education and Master of Arts in distance Education) of IGNOU and the reasons for attrition were examined. How the attrition rate can be reduced in these two programmes has been discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Student attrition and completion rate in any distance teaching learning programme should get continuous attention from the researchers, distance teachers and managers. Success of any such programme depends largely upon these two factors. Extensive research in this area would provide information that may help in developing better quality student learning packages and improving the effectiveness and efficacy of services (Garison, 1987; Bernerd and Amundsen, 1989; Thompson, 1997).

A good number of literatures are available on student attrition. Considering the scope of the present article a very brief review of some of the research articles related to distance teaching learning programmes have been presented.

Phythian and Clements (1980) reported job, domestic pressure and course content too hard or long as three main reasons for dropout from third –level mathematics courses in open university, UK.

Rekkedal (1983) reported a number of reasons for learners' dropout from the NKI school, Norway like, lack of time, job commitments, changed career plans, economic reasons, illness, unsatisfactory living or study conditions, and personal reasons.

Kennedy and Powell (1976) opined that dropout is a phenomenon caused by learners' characteristics (educational background, personality, motivation, aptitude and so on) and life circumstances (occupation, relationship with family and peer group, health and so on).

Thompson (1997) conducted a study to investigate the extent to which a range of demographic, academic and administrative variables were related to attrition and persistence of external students enrolled in the fourth year of the Bachelor of Education course at Edith Cowan University during semester, 1995. Those students who withdrew from their studies had less teaching experience and completed fewer units and semesters of study. The majority of student reported that work, family and study commitments were the main reason(s) for their withdrawal. Withdrawn students were much less satisfied with the level of communication with the tutor and their assignment feedback.

Some other researchers also have identified conflict between the study and other commitments in family, social or working life as one of the important reasons for dropout (Louttit, 1968; Cullen, 1994; Smith, 1987; Fan and Chan, 1997).

Some researchers reported psychological reasons for dropout like, feeling of inadequacy, distress (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1996); lack of confidence (Cullen, 1994) examination anxiety (Fan and Chan, 1997) and so on.

Dissatisfaction with the course content or learning environment (Chyung, Winiiecki and Fenner, 1998) and difficult content (Fan and Chan, 1997) have also been identified as important reasons for attrition.

Though a number of studies have been conducted in various distance teaching learning institutes in different parts of the world, some open universities have given little attention in this area, e.g., open universities in India including IGNOU. IGNOU has launched professional, general, technical and teacher education programmes. Some of the programmes have been launched more than 10 years before. These programmes require thorough investigation with regard to the attrition and completion rate over the years. The present paper reports an analytical study of the student attrition and completion rate of two distance education programmes of IGNOU namely Post-graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE) and Master of Arts in Distance Education (MADE)

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the present study were to:

- (i) analyse the percentage of students who have not completed some or all of the assignment components (continuous examination) of the programme;
- (ii) analyse the percentage of students who have successfully completed the assignment components, but do not complete the term-end examination within the maximum duration available;
- (iii) analyse the percentage of students who have successfully completed the programme;
- (iv) study whether there is any change in attrition and completion rate over the years;
- (v) examine various factors responsible for student attrition in these programmes; and
- (vi) report the students' benefits after successful completion of the programmes.

METHODOLOGY

Step 1: Relevant admission and completion data of the PGDDE and MADE students (admitted during 1994-2000) were collected from the Students Registration and Evaluation Division of IGNOU.

Step 2: Data were analysed to note:

- (i) the percentage of students who have taken admission in a particular year but have withdrawn before completing the assignments (continuous examination) which are compulsory for appearing in term-end examination (objective no.(i) of this study),

- (ii) the percentage of students who have taken admission in a particular year but have not completed the term-end examination after completing the assignment components within the maximum duration available (objective no. (ii),
- (iii) the percentage of students (1994-2000) who have completed the programmes (objective no. (iii).
- (iv) Considering the maximum number of years (i.e. 4 years) a student gets to complete either PGDDE or MADE, students admitted during 1994 to 2000 were considered for this study. Percentage of dropout has been calculated on the basis of the number of students taken in a particular year e.g. in 1994 only 450 students took admission to PGDDE programme, 84.00% of those students did not complete the assignments components (refer to Table 1). In this way the percentage has been calculated year-wise up to the year 2000 both for PGDDE and MADE (objective no. iv).

Step 3 : Two hundred and fifty withdrawn students (150 PGDDE and 100 MADE) were randomly selected. Their admission data were further analysed to examine the non-controllable factors (gender, marital status, employment status, geographical area) responsible for student attrition.

Step 4: A questionnaire was developed and sent to the selected students by post to examine other factors responsible for student attrition.

Altogether 103 (41.20%) students responded to the questionnaire (74 PGDDE and 29 MADE). Their responses were analysed to fulfil the objective no. v of the study.

Demographic characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows:

PGDDE respondents: 71.62% respondents were male and 28.38% were female, 52.70% were employed and 47.30% were unemployed, 72.97% were married and 27.13% were unmarried, 60.81% belonged to urban areas and 39.19% belonged to rural areas. Their age ranges from 22 to 42 with an average of 31.74 years.

MADE students: 65.52% respondents were male and 34.48% were female, 62.07% were employed and 39.93% were unemployed, 58.62% were married and 41.38% were unmarried, 79.31% belonged to urban areas and 20.69% belonged to rural areas. Their age ranges from 24 to 48 with an average of 32.31 years.

RESULTS

In order to find out the pattern of student attrition in PGDDE and MADE programmes, student records for 7 years (1994-2000) were analysed. The rationale behind the selection of this 7 years period are as follows:

Though MADE programme was launched in 1993. The DDE programme of IGNOU was updated as PGDDE in 1994. Maximum duration for completing a programme (either PGDDE or MADE) is 4 years. The student taken admission in 2001 session and after, would get more chances to complete the programme. The last chance for appearing in term-end examination for the students admitted up to 2000 is over.

The data have been analysed taking the enrolment no. of the students into consideration. The percentage of non-completion of assignments and the percentage of non-completion of term-end examination after completing assignments by the PGDDE and MADE students have been depicted in Table 1-4. The percentage depicted in Table 1-4 are the percentage of the total number of students admitted in a specific year.

Student attrition before completing the assignment

The analysis revealed that the highest percentage (84%) of student dropout in PGDDE before completing the assignment component is from 1994 batch, whereas the lowest percentage (67.28) of student drop out is from 2000 batch (Table 1).

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
PGDDE students (%)	84.00	81.29	78.77	82.08	73.93	70.05	67.28
Total no. of students	450	449	504	346	326	521	593

Table 1: Percentage of non-completion of assignments (continuous examination) by the PGDDE students (Batch-wise)

The analysis of MADE programme revealed that the highest percentage (66.67%) of student dropout before completing the assignment component is from 2000 batch, whereas the lowest percentage (44.23%) of student dropout is from 1998 batch (Table 2). The data did not reveal any specific trend of non-completion of assignment components (Figure 1).

In case of PGDDE there was a slight decline in non-completion rate starting from 84% in 1994 to 78.77% in 1996, but there was a sudden increase (82.08%) in 1997 and again around 10%-15% decrease in the following years. In case of MADE there was a slight increase in non-completion rate of assignment starting from 1994 (50.94%) to 1997 (60.87%), then there was a sudden decrease in 1998 (44.23%) followed by 20%-22% increase in the following years.

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
MADE students (%)	50.94	53.84	60.00	60.87	44.23	64.10	66.67
Total no. of students	53	52	50	23	52	39	39

Table 2: Percentage of non-completion of assignments (continuous examination) by the MADE students (Batch-wise)

Student attrition after completing the assignments

A further analysis revealed that a very low percentage of PGDDE and MADE students have not completed their term-end examination after completing the assignment component (Table 3 and 4). Most of the students have appeared in the examinations but failed to clear either one or two courses, as they did not perform well. But the student percentage of non-appearance in the term-end examination is very low (less than 1%).

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
PGDDE students (%)	2.67	2.00	4.97	2.31	7.97	12.28	11.13

Table 3: Percentage of non-completion of term-end examination by the PGDDE students after completing assignment components (Batch-wise)

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
MADE students (%)	5.66	7.69	4.00	8.69	5.77	5.13	5.12

Table 4: Percentage of non-completion of term-end examination by the MADE students after completing assignment components (Batch-wise)

Students' completion rate of PGDDE and MADE programme

The percentage of the students who have completed the PGDDE and MADE programmes are depicted in Table 5.

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
PGDDE	13.33	16.71	16.27	15.61	18.10	17.67	21.59
MADE	43.40	38.47	36.00	30.44	50.00	30.77	28.21

Table 5: Percentage of students (Batch-wise) who have completed PGDDE and MADE programmes

An analysis revealed that completion rate of MADE programme is comparatively better than the PGDDE programme. The highest percentage (50.00%) of student completion in MADE is from 1998 batch, whereas the lowest percentage (28.21%) is from 2000 batch. The highest percentage (21.59%) of student completion in PGDDE is from 2000 batch, whereas the lowest percentage (13.33%) is from 1994 batch.

The data did not reveal any specific trend in completion rate in relation to both the programmes (Figure 2).

Reasons for withdrawal

There was higher proportion of male students in both the PGDDE (66%) and MADE (77%) sample. However, there was no significant difference between the withdrawn and completed PGDDE students ($\chi^2 = 0.705$, $df = 1$, $p < .100$) and MADE students ($\chi^2 = 0.42$, $df = 1$, $p < .100$).

There was higher proportion of urban students in both the PGDDE (71%) and MADE (75%) sample. However, there was no significant difference between the withdrawn and completed PGDDE students ($\chi^2 = 2.15$, $df = 1$, $p < .100$) and MADE students ($\chi^2 = 0.01$, $df = 1$, $p < .100$) with respect to geographical areas (urban and rural).

A little higher portion of PGDDE (52%) and MADE (52%) students were employed. But there was no significant difference between the withdrawn and completed PGDDE ($\chi^2 = 1.09$, $df = 1$, $p < .100$), and MADE students ($\chi^2 = 2.652$, $df = 1$, $p < .100$) with respect to their employment status.

There was higher proportion of married students in both the PGDDE (66.67%) and MADE (65%) sample. Though there was no significant difference between the withdrawn and completed MADE students ($\chi^2 = 0.202$, $df = 1$, $p < .100$) with respect to marital status, a moderately significant difference was obtained between PGDDE withdrawn and completed students ($\chi^2 = 6.04$, $df = 1$, $p > .025$).

The students' have expressed several reasons for their withdrawal from the programmes in response to the questionnaire. The main reasons are depicted in Table 6. Some students indicated one reason, but most of them indicated more than one reasons. Reasons have been identified in 7 categories. Analysis of data revealed that majority (59.46%) PGDDE students indicated lack of time due to family commitments as the major reason for dropout. Lack of time due to work commitment has been identified as another important reason for dropout of PGDDE students (41.89%). The other important reasons are lengthy and difficult course content (32.43%), lack of academic support (27.02%), loss of interest (20.27%), content not relevant (25.68%) to their present career development, and fear of failure (16.22%).

Reasons for withdrawal	Percentage	
	PGDDE	MADE
Family commitments	59.46	17.24
Job commitments	41.89	20.69
Lengthy and difficult course content	32.43	48.28
Lack of academic support	27.02	44.83
Loss of interest	20.27	31.03
Course content not relevant to present career	25.68	13.79
Fear of failure	16.22	27.59
Majority indicated more than one reasons. Thus, the total percentage is more than 100.		

Table 6: Reasons for withdrawal as expressed by the students and their percentage

A low percentage of MADE students indicated lack of time due to family commitment (17.24%) and work commitment (20.69%) as reasons for withdrawal. Course content lengthy and difficult (48.28%) and lack of academic support (44.83%) are the main reasons for dropout. The other reasons are loss of interest (31.03%), fear of failure (27.59%) and course content not relevant (13.79%) to their present career development.

DISCUSSION

One may be surprised to note the higher percentage of drop out in PGDDE and MADE programmes of IGNOU. If we consider the nature of the programme, the characteristics of the student population and reasons for their withdrawal the finding should not be so surprising. There were two categories of students: (i) distance educators working in the open and distance learning system and (ii) persons who were graduate and interested to join the system in future. Almost all the students belonged to the first category completed the programme. Majority of the dropout students belonged to the second category.

Student attrition rate in PGDDE programme was higher than the attrition rate in MADE programme over the years. Students took admission to MADE after completing the PGDDE. Their experience as a PGDDE student in IGNOU helped them to overcome some barriers like family commitments and job commitments. Though a large percentage were married and employed they learned time management. On the contrary the PGDDE students had to face more conflict between studies and family /job commitments. These findings are line with the findings reported by some other researchers in this area (Phythian & Clements, 1980; Rekkedal, 1983; Thompson, 1997).

A moderately significant difference as obtained between the withdrawn and completed PGDDE students with respect to marital status (one of the important background characteristic) suggests that this might have indirect influence on other variables.

One significant feature of the present findings was higher rate of student attrition before completing the assignment component. Fan and Chan (1997) reported that around 70% of the dropout cases were at around the time of submission of first assignment. Students in distance learning system need to acquire some skills for writing assignments. Most of the assignments in PGDDE and MADE programmes were short answer (about 300 words) and long answer (about 1500 words) types. While indicating 'lack of academic support' as reason for withdrawal, the students expressed their inability in writing a long answer assignment. They needed more guidance and counselling for writing assignments. Some MADE students wanted academic support in theory courses whilst some other in project work. Some PGDDE students indicated that they were not satisfied with the tutor comments received along with their evaluated assignments and some indicated that the period of academic counselling and the quality was not sufficient for them.

The university may take some steps to control these factors. At present there is no face-to-face counselling facility for the MADE students. The university may think about this aspect and can start face-to-face counselling for the MADE students as available in other programmes of IGNOU. As a significant percentage had 'fear of failure' more and more contact programmes might help in reducing the dropout percentage significantly. The core faculty who develop, maintain and coordinate the PGDDE and MADE programmes may increase the number of contacts with the students using various media like phone-in radio

counselling, teleconferencing, using e-mail facilities and so on. About 300 students completed Masters Degree in Distance Education from IGNOU. The students who performed well may be selected as academic counsellor for guiding the students for theoretical courses and project work both.

The part-time PGDDE academic counsellors who are responsible for holding academic counselling and evaluating assignments may be oriented periodically and the assignments evaluated by them may be monitored by the core faculty on regular basis. These may make a significant difference to those students who are not satisfied with the tutor comments and counselling and are not sure how to tackle the assignments, lengthy and difficult course content and so on.

Dissatisfaction with the course content as an important reason for dropout has been identified by the researchers (Chyung, Winiecki and Fenner, 1998). Both the programmes under study are teacher education/professional development programmes in distance education. Keeping the scope, components and rapid development in distance education the contents have been selected and approved by the expert committees. Some students felt the course content lengthy. Generally the students felt difficulties in one or two courses out of five courses in each programme and also in project work in MADE. Those problems or difficulties might be tackled by the university by introducing more contact sessions and monitoring the already available contact sessions regularly.

Learning strategies followed by the students are also important. A study with the successful students of PGDDE programme revealed that total hours spent in studies, the reading

techniques followed, notes taking, the quantum of units (content covered), the number of activities attempted etc. had shown some effect on the academic performance of the students (Biswas, 2001).

Another aspect that needs special attention is 'loss of interest' in the programme. Why some students lost their interest? There may be various reasons. Some of the students in this study lost interest due to non-receipt of evaluated assignments in time, receiving low grades in his/her assignments, and so on. Some students (teachers from conventional institutes and attached to non-academic fields) reported that the course contents were not relevant to their job. Some were of the opinion that these programmes would not help them to get a job in open universities.

The open universities in India including IGNOU might think about the utilization of the Postgraduate Diploma and Masters Degree in Distance Education. Recently Biswas and Mythili (2004) reported the impact of these two programmes on personal and career development of the successful students. The findings revealed that these two programmes had a very good impact on knowledge development and good impact on skill development in various specialized areas of distance education. But the impact on career development was not so significant. The authors suggested that the programmes might be reviewed and some components for skill development might be introduced like, hands on experience in evaluating assignments (student's own discipline), developing self-learning print units (student's own discipline), live demonstration of audio-video production, live demonstration of academic counselling, preparation of one seminar instead of one

assignment and so on. These kinds of activities may develop more interest of the students and may help in reducing the dropout rate significantly.

CONCLUSIONS

The student attrition rate in PGDDE programme is higher than the attrition rate in MADE programme. Lack of time due to family and job commitments are found to be the main reasons for withdrawal from PGDDE programme. To some extent university can help in this respect by providing guidance in time management through their core faculty and part-time academic counsellors. Other factors may be controlled to a large extent by providing intense pre-entry counselling, monitoring the counselling sessions and evaluated assignments with tutor comments, providing more concrete guidance in writing assignments, introducing different types of assignments besides short answer and long answer types, sending evaluated assignments to the students in time, increasing the number of contacts with the core faculty and coordinators of the courses using various technologies like phone-in radio counselling, teleconferencing, e-mail, and even cell phone, introducing more hands-on experience for skill development and so on. Face-to-face counselling may be introduced for the MADE students. Students may be asked to prepare a seminar. Contacts between the core faculty and the students may be increased using various communication technologies. Successful students in these two programmes are useful resource base in distance education system, their services may be utilized properly by all the open universities including IGNOU in the field of distance education.

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