

## RP8

### Preliminary Causes for the University Dropout at the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka

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#### Abstract

University dropout without completing the degree is one of the prominent drawbacks that affect institutions of higher education, individuals, and society worldwide. The current literature has focused on identifying the internal or external characteristics of students' neglecting the pool of aspects in broad. This study aims to identify how career interest, financial, academic, and social factors affect the student's dropout to address the desertion of universities based on their justifications. A Google questionnaire was used to collect data from 30 randomly selected dropped out undergraduates of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna. The majority (70 %) of participants were female. The sample representing 80% of participants have expressed their satisfaction towards the dropout decision while 20% have regretted their decision of leaving the degree program. This finding claims that one out of five dropout students regrets their decision subsequently. According to the Wilcoxon Sign Rank Test results, the deviated career interest of the undergraduates significantly influenced their decision to drop out during the university period ( $p=0.043$ ,  $\alpha<0.05$ ). However, the financial difficulties when acquiescing essential requirements like food, clothes, *etc.* ( $p=0.463$ ,  $\alpha>0.05$  accommodation ( $p=0.172$ ,  $\alpha>0.05$ ) and the academic vulnerability because of complexity ( $p=0.686$ ,  $\alpha>0.05$ ), language problems ( $p=0.464$ ,  $\alpha>0.05$ ) did not significantly influence their dropout decision. The social isolation due to unhealthy relationships with batch mates ( $p=0.008$ ,  $\alpha<0.05$ ), academic staff ( $p=0.020$ ,  $\alpha<0.05$ ) were also significant and have influenced undergraduates' dropout decisions. The academic, financial, and social factors related issues can be addressed by developing a conceptual model that signals the vulnerability of desertion of each undergraduate beforehand. The timely intervention of academic staff while organizing efficient student mentoring sessions for needy students seems necessitated and also the outcome of this study will assist the administration body to reclaim the academic policies to diminish university dropout in advance.

**Keywords:** University Dropouts, Academic Vulnerability, Financial Difficulties, Social Isolation, Career Interest

## **Introduction**

University dropout is one of the prominent drawbacks that affect institutions of higher education, individuals, and society as a whole. According to Voelkle and Sander (2018), dropping out of university without completing the degree has significant ramifications for individuals, institutions of higher education, and society. Voelkle and Sander (2018) once revealed that deficient teaching and the lack of assistance at the institutional level have caused potential student dropouts at the preliminary level. Apart from that, wasted time, private cost, and potential psychological trauma for the individual generate petrifying effects owing to considerable marginalization and the fallacious interpretation towards negative labour market outcomes (Ortiz and Dehon, 2013). From the societal point of view, dropouts hinder another student's opportunity to become a graduate and correspondingly it wastes tax resources that have been allocated for the dropout students until the course ends (Voelkle and Sander, 2008).

Even though students who drop out may re-enrol into another institution or field of study, securing students' retention has become a major policy concern to avoid counteractive ramifications of dropouts (Voelkle and Sander, 2008). Therefore, a study was conducted to investigate the nature and major determinants of university dropout among students in an attempt to design a conceptual model to accompany appropriate intervention strategies.

The current literature has focused on identifying the internal or external characteristics of students, which affect university students' dropouts despite considering the pool of aspects related to the academic, social, economic, and institutional context in broad. This study aims to identify how personal, academic, institutional, social, and financial factors affect the student's dropout to address the desertion of universities based on their justifications. The present study will assist the administration body of the universities to revise the academic policies to diminish university dropout.

## **Methodology**

The study was mainly designed to investigate the cumulative effect of academic vulnerability, social isolation, family burdens, and career interests' affect the trajectory of dropout among undergraduate students in the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna. The primary data were collected using a pre-tested Google questionnaire. The random sampling method was utilized and collected data from thirty undergraduates who left the three-degree programs; BSc in Agricultural Resource Management & Technology, BSc in Agribusiness Management, and BSc in Green Technology during the last five years.

The variables to identify the family background by means of parents' educational qualification, financial viability, and the number of dependents were considered. Moreover, students' vulnerability to the academic context given complex system theories, language problems, examination matters, and the workload were also observed in the study. Finally, student interest in their career choices was also taken into account. Several questions like the level of agreement for the above-mentioned causes were asked to determine the underlying causes of their trajectory action. Consequently, this study allows examining the relationship between undergraduates' socioeconomic characteristics with their tune-out decisions. The secondary data was gathered through reports, journals, etc.

In this survey, analysis was conducted based on two areas. They are the level of importance of social relationships for the students and the cognitive ability of the students. The data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software. The descriptive statistics were used to demonstrate the undergraduates' socio-economic features, and the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was conducted to analyze the weight of the effect of each factor on their ultimate decision to desert the university. A Chi-square test was conducted to evaluate the cumulative effects through exposing the relationship between undergraduates' socioeconomic characteristics with the principal causes of the dropout.

## **Results and Discussion**

The sample includes 56.67% of undergraduates pursuing BSc Agricultural Resource Management & Technology, 30% pursuing BSc Agribusiness Management, and 13.33% pursuing BSc Green Technology degree programmes. Among all, the majority of 70% of the participants are females. The participants representing the sample are currently engaged in different fields. The majority (43.33%) are pursuing a permanent job, 3.33% are self-employed, and 6.67% are engaged in temporary employment, while 43.33% are continuing their further education. However, 3.33% of respondents are still unemployed. The majority, 80% of participants have expressed their satisfaction towards the decision to drop out while 20% have regretted their choice to leave the degree program. These results show that one out of five dropout students regret their decision later on. Table 1 illustrates the Wilcoxon Sign Rank test results undergraduates' level of agreement for each attribute of the dropout reasons.

The preliminary cause underlying the Faculty dropouts has been revealed as deviated career interest of the undergraduates. It has significantly influenced students' dropout decisions ( $p= 0.043$ ,  $\alpha<0.05$ ), and the participants agreed that they found the degree program doesn't fit with their career interests with time. Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2008) once revealed the fact that household economic conditions and credit constraints might be the reasons for being unable to afford university and for abandoning studies.

**Table 1: The Wilcoxon Sign Rank Test to identify the significance of each attribute on dropout decision**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Mean value</b>	<b>Test value</b>	<b>P-value</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>Career interest</b>	The nature of this degree program won't assure an employment opportunity just after the graduation	0.26	1.129	0.259	Not Significant
	I found that the degree program doesn't fit with my career interest	0.20*	1.33	0.043	<b>Significant, Agree</b>
<b>Financial Difficulties</b>	I faced difficulties when preparing paper materials	-0.46*	-2.48	0.013	<b>Significant, Strongly Disagree</b>
	I faced difficulties when finding expenses for accommodation	0.13	0.73	0.463	Not Significant
	I faced difficulties when acquiescing to my basic needs (food, clothes, etc.)	-0.26	-1.36	0.172	Not Significant
<b>Academic vulnerability</b>	The subjects of the degree program are too complex	-0.13	-0.404	0.686	Not Significant
	I faced difficulties when understanding lectures in English	-0.13	-0.73	0.464	Not Significant
	I faced difficulties when communicating in English	-0.33*	-1.65	0.001	<b>Significant, Disagree</b>
	I faced difficulties when facing examinations	-0.33	-1.712	0.098	Not Significant
<b>Social Isolation</b>	Lack of support from friends	-0.80*	-3.24	0.001	<b>Significant, Disagree</b>
	Lack of support from senior batch mates	-0.53*	-2.48	0.013	<b>Significant, Disagree</b>
	I could maintain a healthy relationship with my batch mates	0.73*	2.63	0.008	<b>Significant, Agree</b>
	I could maintain a healthy relationship with lecturers	0.53*	2.33	0.020	<b>Significant, Agree</b>

**Table 1: The Wilcoxon Sign Rank Test to identify the significance of each attribute on dropout decision**

Factor	Statement	Mean value	Test value	P-value	Comment
	I experienced physical/ mental harassment from the batch mates	-0.96*	-3.23	0.001	<b>Significant, Disagree</b>
	I experienced physical/ mental harassment from the academic staff	-0.76*	-2.69	0.007	<b>Significant, Disagree</b>
	I experienced physical/ mental harassment from non-academic staff	-0.76*	-2.65	0.008	<b>Significant, Disagree</b>

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test: Significance Level is 0.05  
Cronbach's Alpha: 0.885

However, the results demonstrated that the effort made on acquiescing paper materials, accommodations, and other expenses did not directly influence dropouts. The reason is that 50% of undergraduates' average monthly income of the family is 25000-50 000 LKR, while for 23.33% is 50 000- 75 000 LKR and for 13.33% ranged from 75 000 – 100 000 LKR per month. Meanwhile, 13.33% of undergraduates possess an average income of more than 100,000 LKR per month. Moreover, 40% of participants have had financial assistance (Mahapola, Bursary, Scholarships) while 60% did not receive any funds during the university period.

The deficient teaching and the lack of assistance at the institutional level have caused potential students' dropouts at the preliminary level (Voelkle and Sander, 2018). However, considering the degree programs of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, the participants proved that academic vulnerability in view of subject complexity, workload, language problems, and examination matters have not significantly influenced their dropout decision.

Apart from that, potential psychological trauma and considerable marginalization can accelerate students' dropouts (Ortiz and Dehon, 2013). However, the test results revealed that a healthy relationship of the undergraduates with batch mates, academic and non-academic staff have prevented students from social isolation during the university period. Undergraduates' overall satisfaction with the ultimate decision was analyzed. The test statistics revealed that undergraduates are highly satisfied with the dropout decision with an associated significance level of 0 .000( $\alpha < 0.05$ ).

## Conclusions

University dropout is one of the prominent drawbacks that affect institutions of higher education worldwide. The sample representing 80% of participants have expressed their satisfaction towards their dropout decision while 20% have regretted. The principal cause underlying their ultimate decision was a deviation in their career interest. The overall analysis revealed that there is no significant influence of financial difficulties, academic vulnerability, and social isolation on undergraduates' dropout decisions. Even though students who drop out may re-enrol into another institution or field of study, securing students' retention has become a major policy concern to avoid counteractive ramifications of dropouts. Therefore, the timely intervention of academic staff when students are about to leave the degree program is necessary to diminish university dropouts. Moreover, developing a database based on academic performance, which signal the vulnerability of desertion due to academic contretemps of each undergraduate, conducting frequent student mentoring and counselling sessions, and establishing funds for financially unstable students can be embraced to prevent dropout in advance.

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