

## Research Papers/Extended Abstracts

### **Voluntary Discontinuation and Timely Completion Rates of Undergraduate Programs: A Case Study in the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka**

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#### **Abstract**

A higher timely-graduation rate with lower dropouts, either voluntarily or involuntarily, are among the prime concerns of any undergraduate programme. A clear understanding of the reasons for voluntary discontinuation of programs is needed to minimize such incidences. The objectives of this study were to analyze the rates of and reasons for the voluntary discontinuation and to determine the timely-graduation rates of the undergraduates who followed the degree programs in the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna. The study collected information about the students who left three-degree programs; namely BSc Agricultural Resources Management and Technology (AT), BSc Green Technology (GT), and BSc Agribusiness Management (AB). Of the total of 140 students who had discontinued the programmes during five academic years from 2012 to 2016, 100 students could be contacted over the phone. The faculty has experienced a 40% decline in student enrollment from 2012-2016. Of the total of 1085 students enrolled during five academic years, 140 (12.9%) had discontinued the programs midway, mainly in the first semester (72.8%), followed by the second (10.71%), and third (7.1%) semesters. Some left even at the fourth (6.42%) or fifth (0.71%) semesters. The discontinuation rate showed no clear trend across academic years or degree programs. According to the results, 50% reported that they left the programs to follow job-oriented professional courses such as Medical Laboratory Technicians, Pharmacists, Nursing Officers and Public Health Inspectors. Another one-third (34%) had left the program directly for a job. Three per cent of the respondents admitted that they enrolled on the program without knowing what the programme would exactly be and the academic environment they would experience. They reported discontinuing the program after realizing the gap between their expectations and reality. Another 2% were dissatisfied with university subculture related activities, while for 1%, personal commitments such as marriage was the reason for programme discontinuation. All reported that they are happy with the programme-discontinuation decision. The first-time graduation rate of the faculty was  $82 \pm 9.6$ . The GT (90.5%) had a higher first-time graduation rate than AT ( $78.9 \pm 0$ ) and AB ( $78.1 \pm 7.0$ ). It was revealed that financial difficulties

and insecure job prospects for the graduates are the primary causes of programme discontinuation. The study highlights the need for strategies to increase the timely graduation rates.

**Keywords:** *Completion, Discontinuation, Drop Outs, Program, Undergraduates*

## Introduction

Out of the total number of undergraduates enrolled for a programme, a majority meets the stipulated requirements for graduation within the minimum permissible time. Though some of the others complete the programme taking longer time, a proportion of enrolled students opt to discontinue the programme. Higher timely programme completion rate and lower discontinuation rates are among the prime expectations of all. Larsen *et al.* (2013), defines programme discontinuation as the act of departing from a university without completing the degree requirements. A student might choose to leave university voluntarily due to financial difficulties or personal challenges. Voluntary discontinuation decisions are promoted by the external incentives such as availability of appealing job prospects. Situation where a student has to discontinue a programme against his or her wish is referred to as involuntary discontinuation. According to Tinto, (1975) involuntary discontinuation cases primarily stem from poor grades, often linked to inadequate academic integration. Sometimes, involuntary discontinuation instances are referred to as dropouts.

Concerns over voluntary discontinuation of undergraduate programs are growing both globally and locally. Discontinuation of an undergraduate programme has a range of negative impacts on individual students and their immediate families. Behr *et al.* (2020) discuss that on a personal level, discontinuation is often perceived as a reflection of personal failure and a waste of time and financial investments. Sosu and Pheunpha (2019) mentioned that from a societal standpoint, discontinuation could be seen as a misuse of tax resources since an individual dropping out occupies a university spot that could have been filled by another student. Programme discontinuation has negative impacts on the national human resource development. Moreover, it diminishes the efficient utilization of resources in state-funded higher education institutions.

Programme discontinuation needs particular attention under Sri Lankan conditions where the education in state universities is free of charges. However, as Bedregal-Alpaca *et al.* (2020) pointed out, undergraduates in state universities express several worries, ranging from questioning the universities' efficiency, and the quality of academic programs and the management system, which

could potentially harm the institution's reputation. Such negative concerns can also be a contributory factor for discontinuation decisions.

Systematic studies on this issue are required to introduce strategies to minimize the discontinuation of programs by undergraduates who have enrolled in programs. The results of such analysis are useful not only for specific Faculties/Universities but also for wider policymakers as well. This study firstly analyzed the reasons and rates of the voluntary discontinuation of the programs by the undergraduates who followed degree programs in the Faculty of Agriculture (FoA), University of Ruhuna. Furthermore, programme completion rates at different attempts were also studied.

## **Methodology**

The study followed two stages. In the first stage, information about the students who followed all three-degree programs namely; BSc Agricultural Resources Management and Technology (AT), BSc Green Technology (GT), and BSc Agribusiness Management (AB) was collected from records available in the FoA and the Students' Affairs Branch. Collected information included the number of students in each academic year, the number of students who had left the program each semester, and the number of students who graduated at the first, second, third, and fourth attempts. Records of the total number of 140 students who discontinued the programmes showed that they are from all over the country. Considering the time and resources required for meeting all of them physically, in the second stage, those students were contacted over the phone. A pre-tested questionnaire containing both structured and open-ended questions was employed to investigate the reasons for abandoning the program. Information about the students of four academic years starting from 2011/2012 was collected. Therefore, the experimental procedure can best be identified as a mixture of qualitative-exploratory and descriptive types. After cycles of attempts, 100 (71.4%) students were able to be contacted over the phone. For this study, degree programmes and academic years were considered as the independent variables while dropout rates, timely-completion rate and the reasons for discontinuation were considered as the dependent variables. Descriptive statistics were used to interpret the results.

## **Results and Discussion**

Over the period from 2012 to 2016, a total of 1085 students had enrolled for three undergraduate programs offered by the FoA. The mean annual student enrollment for AT, AB, and GT programs were 134 (range 112-162), 47 (range 36-59) and 36 (range 21-62), respectively. Surprisingly, the student enrolment at the FoA has reported a 40% decline during the period concerned. The reduction was as high as 66% for GT, followed by 66% and 39%, respectively for AB and AT programs. The

reasons for the above sharp decline in student enrolment for all programs are not known. However, it needs to be noted that the situation has been improved substantially during the recent annual-enrolment-cycles.

Aggravating the situation, even among those who enrolled, as high as 12.9% (140 students) of the undergraduates had opted to leave the program midway at various stages of their respective academic programs (Table 1). The highest percentage of program discontinuation was reported in the first semester (72.8%) followed by the second 10.71% and third 7.14% semesters. In line with our findings, Christie *et al.* (2004) also reported that the majority of discontinuation decisions are taken during the first year. Though the tendency to leave the program declined gradually as the program progressed, some undergraduates had left the program even at the fourth (6.42%) or fifth semester (0.71%).

Discontinuation of the programs has numerous negative implications. Firstly, abandonment of the programme, after being competitively selected on the Z score of the GCE (A/L) examination, can be considered a deprivation of an opportunity for other students who qualified to follow the programs. Since education in Government Universities in Sri Lanka is free of charge, midway discontinuation of an undergraduate program can be viewed as a waste of public resources as well. Thirdly, apart from wasting their productive time and resources, those who left the programs might have missed or delayed the opportunity of becoming a graduate. The rate of discontinuation showed no clear trend. For example, the highest percentage of discontinuation (19.3%) was reported in 2012 while that of 2015 was the lowest (6.4%). Among AT and GT students, the discontinuation rate was highest in 2012 while the same was highest in 2016 for AB. Among AB students, the discontinuation percentage was as high as 30% in 2016.

The study could get the views of 100 out of 140 (71%) students who had discontinued their programs. Around one third (34% of them had left the program to engage in a job. Some of them followed courses while doing a job. An Australian study (O'Keefe *et al.*, 2011) showed that a majority of undergraduates who discontinued the programs opted to transfer to alternative programs which are more aligned with their career paths. In the present study, 50% reported that, after leaving the undergraduate programs, they enrolled to follow job-oriented professional courses, particularly in the field of health sector. The most popular such choices include Medical Laboratory Technicians (21%), Pharmacists (12%), Nursing Officers (12%) and Public Health Inspectors (5%). However, it needs to be noted that none of them enrolled for other undergraduate programs. All the above choices guaranteed Government employment at the end of successful completion with an allowance during the training period. Christie *et al.* (2004) suggested that discontinuation decision on a degree program is a result of a complex interaction among a number of student-related, social and institutional factors.

Discussions with those who left the undergraduate program for a job or job-oriented professional non-degree course, revealed that the decision, though mainly influenced by financial consideration, was taken after taking many aspects into careful consideration. An overwhelming majority said that they had to select the situation of guaranteed non-graduate level employment opportunity against the degree which offers no guarantee of an employment after four years of time, effort and resources. All the participants interviewed declared that they were quite happy with the decision they have taken.

Only 3% said that they enrolled the program with little knowledge about what they were supposed to study and in which set-up. Those respondents further said that they discontinued the program, having realized the gap between what they expected and what was experienced. 2% of the respondents were not happy with some activities they had to comply with “University subculture” such as political involvements, protests and pasting posters etc. Personal commitments such as marriage 1% were of minor reasons for program discontinuation.

**Table 01:** Voluntary programme discontinuation and degree completion rates of three undergraduate programs.

| Degree Program | Registered | Discontinuation % | Graduation at proper attempt % | Graduation 2 <sup>nd</sup> attempt % | Graduation 3 <sup>rd</sup> attempt % | Graduation 4 <sup>th</sup> attempt % | Yet to graduate |
|----------------|------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| AT             | 673        | 12.03             | 78.92                          | 6.82                                 | 0.74                                 | 0.29                                 | 7               |
| AB             | 233        | 17.16             | 78.14                          | 2.57                                 | 0.85                                 | 0.43                                 | 3               |
| GT             | 179        | 10.61             | 90.5                           | 0.55                                 | 0.55                                 | 0                                    | 0               |
| Total          | 1085       | 12.90             | 82.0                           | 4.79                                 | 0.73                                 | 0.27                                 | 10              |

Successful completion of all required examinations and other conditions within the minimum permitted time period is considered the timely graduation or first time-graduates (Table 01). The first attempt graduation percentage was 82±9.6. Though the situation we observed is similar to the timely graduation rate reported by Tentsho *et al.*, (2019) for Thailand (81%), attention should be paid to increase this percentage. A US study (Letkiewicz *et al.*, 2014) has shown that students who live or work on campus, have a better academic record and who met with a counselor or advisor are more likely to complete the program without overstay. The first-time graduation level of GT (90.5%) was higher than that of AT (78.9±10) and AB (78.1±7.0). All the GT students who had not discontinued the program have successfully completed the program after 3<sup>rd</sup> attempt. However, 7 AT and 3 AB students were yet to complete their respective program, even after the 4<sup>th</sup> attempt.

Reasons for the higher timely-graduation rate of GT students are not clear and thus warrant further studying. Enabling better academic and personal guidance and supervision, batch size was lower for

GT and AB programs than that of AT. In general, the Z score at the entry of the university was higher for GT for the time period considered in this study. Same time, higher variability in Z score among the students was a common feature for all programs. A comprehensive review by Aciro *et al.*, (2021) reported no relationship between entry level performance and graduates' academic performance. Therefore, lower entry level qualifications, in terms of Z score cannot be presented as the major reasons for a lower timely completion rate. Meanwhile, Kyoshaba, (2009) and Aspelmeier *et al.*, (2012) concluded that university-level academic performance is influenced by a range of factors including the parents' educational background, family size, type of high school attended, and the socio-economic status of the student. Therefore, strategies that aim at increasing timely-graduation rate should ideally be based on a range of considerations.

## Conclusion

This study found a higher midway voluntary discontinuation rate for all three-degree programs for the period considered in this study is mainly due to financial reasons, over which the university administration has little or no control. Strategies need to be introduced to improve the timely program completion rates, particularly that of AT and AB students.

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