

WHY DID NEW DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENTS DROP OUT? PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM INDONESIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation is to explore the reasons why some new distance learning students dropped out of the program within the first year. This investigation used interview data from 16 participants representing three geographical locations: Jakarta (metropolitan), Palembang (urban), and Ambon (rural area). The sampling method adopted was purposive sampling. It was expected that they would provide a valuable source of authentic data. To maintain research ethics, the names of the institution and interviewees remained confidential and anonymous. Prior to data gathering, the research questions were formulated into some guiding questions. Participants were encouraged to provide further information through suitable amounts of probing from the interviewers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data was scrutinized and an intercoder was also adopted. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data and provide plausible answers to the research questions. The results showed that external factors, including financial problems, family matters, sustainability of study and work engagement, transportation and internet constraints were dominant. Meanwhile, internal factors were unsatisfactory and unsuitable for the program. It was, important to note that some participants might experience both external and internal factors at the same time. Transportation and internet constraints were experienced by students residing in Ambon (rural area). This finding emphasized the importance of reducing internet access disparities in Indonesia. The majority of the participants admitted that they would resume their studies in the following semester. The evidence of this study suggests that factors that led students to drop out of the program were complex. Therefore, the university is required to undertake comprehensive approaches to ensure that the problems are addressed, which in turn help students finish their studies within the time they plan.

Keywords: distance learning, drop out, interview, qualitative, thematic analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper reports preliminary results from a study to explore the reasons why some new distance learning students dropped out of the program within the first year. It must be underlined that in the current study, the use of dropout terminology might not be entirely accurate. The university where the study took place does not implement a maximum period to complete the programs for its students. In other words, students might resume their studies at any time. The most appropriate terminology might be suspension of study, as students could pause and resume their studies [1]. Therefore, the university provides flexible pathways that meet the needs of diverse students [2]. Consequently, the university keeps the students' records in the database since they register for the first time to anticipate students resuming their studies. In terms of delivery mode, the university is a single-mode distance teaching university. Online and offline tutorials are provided as parts of learning support structures. In addition to online services, the university established regional offices and learning centers for students requiring regular or in-person meetings.

There is a growing body of literature that focuses on student dropout in a distance learning environment. Other topics that relate to student dropout are student attrition, persistence, and retention [3], [4]. Based on the literature review, the main objective of the studies on student dropout, student attrition, and student retention is to analyze in depth the issues that are associated with students' academic progress. Researchers investigated the essential core of the issues in order to ensure student success which is marked by course completion. In recent years, in particular after Covid-19 Pandemic, online learning, which is a form of learning delivery used in distance and campus-based universities, has attracted the attention of researchers. Covid-19 has driven the majority of campus-based universities to shift to distance learning [5]. The current study would agree with Lodge, et al. [6] that online learning has its own method of teaching that is different from traditional methods of teaching. Failure to meet the

requirements for the online method of teaching might lead to student dropout and learning loss [7]. It has been acknowledged that the dropout rate is one of the indicators of a successful online program [8].

Previous research has established that student attrition or dropout in a distance learning environment is high [4], [9]. A robust mixed-method study was conducted by Aydin et al. [10] to discover the reasons for dropping out of Anadolu Open University. The study found that dropout was a complex issue that was influenced by a multitude of factors. For instance, individual factors were inextricably intertwined with environmental factors. These factors might lead to a decision about whether students would continue or stop their studies [11]. To better understand student attrition in open distance learning, Izham et al. [12] conducted a systematic literature review of open distance learning and found that there were seven factors associated with high student retention, including technological, financial, environmental, personal, communication, emotional, and self-regulation factors. The study found that the factors were interrelated because they affected each other. Thus, they should be seen as an integral component of a learning system.

A study with a similar context to the current study was conducted by Utami et al. [13]. The study found that the dropout rate among students in the Biology Department of Universitas Terbuka, a distance learning university in Indonesia, was associated with some factors, including age, educational background, gender, employment status, learning readiness, learning services, and quality learning materials. Interestingly, it was found that mature students were more likely to drop out compared to the younger students. This might be related to the employment status. Mature students who were in employment were indicated to have conflict between their work and study roles. Another interesting finding was related to learning readiness. It was highlighted the importance of having appropriate knowledge about learning at a distance teaching institution. This finding was echoed by Lodge et al. [6]. Furthermore, the study concluded that the critical phase of a student's journey was in the first and second semesters. This issue suggests that developing learning readiness is a necessity to improve student success.

2 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the reasons why some new distance learning students dropped out of the program at the end of the first semester.

The flow of the research process was expected to help the researchers discover the answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the most crucial motives that drive students to suspend their studies?
2. What has the university done to retain the students?
3. What makes the student re-enroll?

The sampling method adopted was purposive sampling [14]. Several procedures were taken to determine the sample, including the sample size. First, discontinuing students were identified from several study programs. Second, the location of the sample was selected. To obtain deeper data, the selection of the location was divided into three categories: metropolitan, suburban, and rural areas. Third, the number of participants in the respective categories was 10 students. Fourth, the participants were invited to participate in the research by email and mobile phones.

It is worth pointing out that the participants were those who discontinued at the end of the first semester. Altogether, the selected participants were representing three geographical locations: Jakarta (metropolitan), Palembang (urban), and Ambon (rural area). It was expected that the participants would provide valuable information and meaningful comparisons of challenges that led to dropout. It was worth emphasizing that internet access in Indonesia was not equitably spread across the nation. In addition, the challenges and student characteristics in metropolitan, urban, as well as in suburban areas must also be diverse.

Of the 30 participants who were willing to participate, 16 finally came to the interviews. The interviews were conducted in the Regional Offices in Jakarta (2 males and 2 females), Palembang (3 males and 2 females), and Ambon (5 males and 2 females). The interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Prior to the interviews, it was mentioned that participation in the research was elective, and they could withdraw at any time. In terms of ages, 3 participants were more than 29 years old, and 13 participants were under 29 years old. All participants were in employment, and three of them were married.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data and provide plausible answers to the research questions. The research questions and literature review were used as guidance for data analysis. Therefore, deductive and inductive approaches [15] were used. It was expected that they would provide a comprehensive overview of all the data.

3 RESULTS

The current study aimed to explore the reasons for dropping out of a distance learning program. The results showed that external factors, including financial problems, family matters, sustainability of study and work engagement, transportation, and internet constraints, were dominant. Meanwhile, internal factors were unsatisfactory and unsuitable for the program. It was important to note that some participants might experience both external and internal factors at the same time. Transportation and internet constraints were experienced by students residing in Ambon (a rural area). This finding emphasized the importance of reducing internet access disparities in Indonesia. The majority of the participants admitted that they would resume their studies the following semester. The evidence of this study suggests that factors that led students to drop out of the program were complex. The following sub-sections present the results and analysis based on the three research questions.

3.1 Motives for suspending from study

Several issues were identified. Interestingly, one participant admitted that he would permanently withdraw. The present student found that the first year was a critical phase for student in distance learning and online learning environments [8].

3.1.1 Financial difficulties

Six participants revealed that they could not register for courses in the following semester due to financial difficulties. Of the six participants, two were under a scholarship program. Unfortunately, the scholarship was suspended as the GPA did not meet the requirements. Consequently, in the second semester, they must be self-funding. The comments below illustrate the issues related to financial difficulties.

I had an emergency situation. Unfortunately, I had to use the money for the school fees. In fact, I have been collecting the money, but I had no choice but to use the money for the emergency. (Female)

My scholarship was suspended because I failed my final examination. (Male)

There was sufficient evidence that financial difficulties led to students dropping out [4], [8], [9], [12]. The most striking was that financial difficulties were faced by both employed and non-employment participants. More importantly, the case related to financial difficulties was experienced by participants residing in rural areas (Ambon). The findings might suggest that further investigation needs to be conducted to explore in detail various aspects of the financial difficulties experienced by students living in rural areas.

3.1.2 Work-study conflict

Seven participants mentioned that they were unable to maintain a balance between work and study. For married female participants, the conflict seemed to be more challenging. They played three roles at the same time: as a mother, a student, and an employee. Two comments representing the condition are as follows:

I work as a teacher and recently I was appointed a secretary at the subdistrict office. Automatically, my responsibility doubled. At the weekend, I must work. So, I decided not to register in the following semester. (Male)

Once I arrive home (from work), I just want to take a rest. I also must take care of my children. (Female)

It has been plausibly argued that work-study conflict is a major challenge faced by distance learning students [16]. Being unable to settle the conflict might lead to dropping out. However, since most distance learning institutions adopt and implement a flexible model of learning, students may resume their studies at any time. The participants who decided to withdraw have a chance to resume their study. Markle [4] maintained that work-study conflict was mostly experienced by female students. Meanwhile,

Bağriacık Yılmaz et al. [9] found that work-study conflict was experienced by both male and female students.

3.1.3 Limited learning facilities

Three main issues were identified. Firstly, the location of face-to-face tutorials and examination sites was too far from the participants' residence. One student mentioned that the examination site was in another island. Consequently, the participant had to travel and provide extra cost and time. Secondly, the webinar on Saturday and Sunday was not suitable for students living in the Middle East. Saturday and Sunday are holidays in Indonesia, where working students are able to attend the webinar, but in the Middle East, holiday is on Friday and students work on Saturday and Sunday. In addition, the time difference between Indonesia and the Middle East was another major challenge. Consequently, they are not able to attend the webinar. Lastly, students did not receive feedback from the tutors. The absence of feedback from the tutors disappointed the participants. Comments related to the three issues are as follows:

I live in Seram Island and there is no examination site here. (Male)

The webinar is on Saturday and Sunday. In Saudi Arabia, the holiday is on Friday. I cannot attend the webinar because I must work on Saturday and Sunday from 7 am. (Female)

I was disappointed. I study for a bachelor's degree not because I need good scores. The online discussion was one way, there were no responses and feedback from the tutor. I sent a direct message, but no reply. Without feedback, I did not know how good my assignments were. (Female)

Insufficient learning facilities, including interaction, lack of support from staff, and learning services, were factors that led to students dropping out [6], [8], [13]. There would therefore seem to be a definite need for understanding the students in order to provide sufficient and appropriate supporting learning systems.

3.1.4 Personal conflict

Personal conflicts were among the problems faced by distance and online learning student [6], [9], [10]. In the current study, one participant revealed that he withdrew because his parents and families did not allow him to continue his studies otherwise; they advised him to study at a campus-based university. The finding indicates that distance learning is not considered as good as campus-based learning. Another participant admitted that he did not need to continue his studies as he had settled. In other words, he did not need further education to improve living conditions. The other student mentioned that she experienced a family problem that affected her final examination. The following excerpts illustrate the participants' condition.

My parents did not allow me to continue my studies. Someone might tell them about studying at campus-based university. My uncles and aunts agreed with my parents. (Male)

I had a family problem. I was frustrated and it affected my study. Finally, I failed the exam. (Female)

I don't think I will continue my studies because I have a good income so far. (Male)

3.1.5 Limited internet access and transportation

Internet access is still an immense technical challenge for online learning provision in Indonesia, in particular in the eastern parts. Izham et al. [12] revealed that poor internet connection was among the factors that could affect students' learning progression. In the present study a student revealed that he was unable to access the internet and online learning services, including webinars and online tutorials, due to the absence of internet access. Another interesting finding was that limited transportation was also a challenge. The issue related to transportation was generally associated with the obligation to sit in on examinations and face-to-face tutorials, which required students to travel from their residence to the appointed sites or locations. The examples of the comments given by the participants are as follows:

If I go to suburbs, I do not have access to the internet so that I cannot follow the online learning. (Male)

The face-to-face tutorial site is far from my house. Public transportation is very limited. I depend on my friend who has a car. He picks me up, but in Saudi Arabia, this is uncommon to rideshare if they are not spouses. (female)

Unlike previous studies, the current study found that an issue related to transportation was a challenge faced by distance and online learning students. The requirement to attend the examinations and face-to-face tutorials physically has doubled the challenge.

3.2 The university measures to reduce non-progressing students

The current study did not find key information about the measures that the university took to reduce non-progressing students. However, the participants provided insight into the concerns and expectations of having more intensive communication with the institution. Two issues were identified. The following subsections outline the participants concerns and expectations.

3.2.1 Personal reminder

Two participants wished to receive personal remainder regarding important dates and information that were sent directly to them. This finding is interesting and an essential recommendation for the university. It is important to note that the majority of the participants were in employment and had professional commitments in addition to marriage and family commitments. The comment below is an example from a participant.

I planned to register in the second semester. Unfortunately, I missed the deadline because I did not know. (Male)

It is important to bear in mind that distance and online learning students might not have sufficient experience to study independently, lack of technology literacy, and lack of preparation [8], [10], [12], and [13].

3.2.2 Personalized learning

One participant expressed regret that he could not join the online learning because, at the same time, he had to work and there was no internet connection. Consequently, the participant missed the sessions, which in turn might affect his final grade. Another participant expected to have more flexibility in taking the examinations. It could be argued that the participants expected to have more flexible learning arrangements that enabled them to follow the lessons at any time. The following comment illustrates the concerns and issues.

As a sailor, when on the sea, I did not have an internet connection. So, I could not access the online learning. (Male)

The findings of this study suggest that personalized learning is a necessary approach in a distance learning context, in particular for working students.

3.3 Factors drives students to resume their studies

The majority of the participants showed a high interest to resume their studies. Based on the answers, the reasons were grouped into three categories.

3.3.1 Career development

Ten participants confirmed that earning a degree could lead to higher status and greater career advancement. Some of the participants who were not in employment expressed that education would help them find jobs in the future. In other words, for working participants, education aimed to grow their knowledge and improve their competencies. On the other hand, participants who were not in employment expressed that education would help them get employment. The key point here was to maintain work-life-study balance. Examples of comments are as follows:

I do not want to become a security for my whole life. I must improve myself for a better job. (Male)

If I earn a degree, as a teacher I will get a higher salary. I will have teaching certification incentives. (Female)

Markle [4] found that students remained enrolled as students at the university to help them have a better life, not only for them but also for their children.

3.3.2 Personal development

In addition to career development, the majority of the participants admitted that they wanted to pursue personal development. They believed that it would help them find good employment, and for some, they wanted to have a different career. Commenting on personal development, three participants said:

I want to learn about law science. (Male)

I have liked accounting since I was in high school. (Female)

I want to become a lawyer. (Male)

The comments above confirm that distance education helps people who want to improve their qualifications and competencies where they are not able to attend conventional learning methods due to various constraints, including time and age requirements. This is an example of the implementation of life-long learning [17].

3.3.3 Role model

Another essential finding was identified when a participant admitted that an external factor (parents) was the source of motivation. This finding echoed the findings of research conducted by Budiman [18].

I want to make my parents proud of me. I will take them to my graduation ceremony and see me becoming a bachelor. (Male)

There is some evidence to suggest that internal and external motivation play an important role in ensuring that students complete their studies on time. Another important issue that arises when discussing motivation is that students must be able to identify and find motivational resources and take advantage of them so that motivation can direct their studies.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the current study was to explore the reasons for dropping out of a program among the first-year students at a distance learning university in Indonesia. The study has found that the first-year dropouts were driven by two major factors, internal and external. The external factors were more dominant than the internal factors. Issues related to limited learning facilities, lack of internet access or coverage, lack of public transportation, unpredicted emergency conditions, and work-study conflicts were encountered by the participants. The study also found that the university has not made considerable efforts to maintain student retention. Therefore, the current study suggests that the university is required to undertake comprehensive approaches to ensure that the problems are addressed, which in turn helps students finish their studies within the time they plan. The study found that the majority of the participants showed eagerness to resume their studies. They revealed that education would enable them to have a better life.

The present study adds to the growing body of research by identifying at least five fundamental reasons for dropping out and three main reasons for continuing the participants' studies. This study suggests that students must be able to cope with challenges in order to manage and complete their studies. At the same time, the university is also responsible for providing an adequate guidance and assistance that can be easily accessed by its students. The current study also suggests that students must be able to share their difficulties with other people, including parents, supervisors, employers, and colleagues, so that they understand the situation being faced.

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