



Do Motivation and Goal Commitment Influence Students' Retention in Open Distance Learning during Pandemic Covid-19 Crisis?

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the determinants of undergraduate student retention in Open Distance Learning (ODL). This study focused on the motivation and goal commitment of students in ODL university. The high attrition rate at higher education institutions has now become a serious issue. Undergraduate retention refers to an institution's ability to retain students from admission until graduation. In order to achieve the goal, education service providers need to know what motivates students to remain in the institution, especially during the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, Covid-19. This paper will provide a brief overview of undergraduate retention followed by factors commonly related to undergraduate retention. In this study, the focus will be on motivation and goal commitment that facilitate the students' decision-making to continue their studies in ODL. Data has been collected from active undergraduate students in 2021. Six learning centres were chosen mainly from Open University Malaysia. The results indicated that both factors, motivations and commitment, are positively significant towards student retention. The management can use the result in managing and understanding the retention issues.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning, Retention, Motivational, Goal Commitment

Introduction

Since the advent of formal education systems, student retention in higher education has been a popular topic (Aljohani, 2016). Student achievement has emerged a key issue in the debate over higher education quality, particularly in open distance learning. Many of the theories used in student retention research have been based on a theoretical model of persistence (Tinto V. , 1975). For the past 100 years, the percentage of students who drop out of higher education has been consistent at 40–45 per cent. (Joana R. Casanova, Cristiano Mauro Assis Gomes, Ana Bernardo , 2021) and the dropout rates for online courses appeared to be greater than the traditional courses (Tinto, 1982). It was highlighted that first-year university students have the greatest dropout rate (Tinto, 2004). These initiatives are critical since many students have worked hard to obtain their degree but have been unsuccessful in doing so (Roberts & Styron, 2009). Worldwide studies have found that dropouts from university pose a significant issue that must be addressed and prevented (Bozkurt & Akbulut, 2019). Hence, student retention continues to pique the interest of governments around the world. At the same time, Institutions and governments seek to incorporate into policy directions, strategic considerations, and overall student care



operations (Beer & Lawson, 2016; Crosling, 2017; Crosling et al., 2009; Lang, 2001; Levitz & Noel, 2008). As a result, higher education started to explore the factors contributing to student retention, besides examining the institution's quality assessment and improvement efforts (Shukor, 2020).

Covid-19 Crisis

More than a year after it originally appeared, the Covid-19 outbreak is still prevalent and spreading. In different places of the world, the repercussions of a pandemic have been handled differently. The globe has changed dramatically in numerous ways as a result of the pandemics' effects. Many universities have been pushed to move learning and teaching entirely online. The epidemic has impacted education in several countries and organisations. However, as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has stated, it is critical to keep education systems operational during the epidemic (UNESCO). According to the report, the pandemic affected about 1.2 billion kids and youth, primarily in vulnerable and underprivileged communities/countries' educational institutions. Even though teachers, administrators, and parents have played an important role in keeping the general learning process alive in various nations, educational systems have not been prepared to deal with extended shutdown periods (Dorn, 2020). Shutdowns have a greater impact on already struggling students during the pandemic, despite the fact that learning loss manifests differently at different ages (Allensworth; Elaine; Schwartz, 2020). Most countries have advanced to create educational initiatives that entrench good habits and target the more vulnerable students to mitigate extended learning during the pandemic (Nughoro, 2020). As can be seen, the crisis has had a negative influence on the learning process. Open University Malaysia (OUM) has been able to manage online learning due to the fact that OUM has been adopting online learning since 2002. OUM has been more than twenty years in the online learning education mode.

Motivation and Goal Commitment

Research on retention has discovered that student attitudes and satisfaction are interrelated (Nes L.S; Evans D.r; Segerstrom S.C, 2009). According to the researchers, students can flourish in the academic environment with enhanced self-efficacy and a conviction in a positive outcome. Academic engagement activities such as undergraduate research have been discovered to have a favourable impact on retention (Townsend, B & K.Wilson, 2009). Students with higher levels of self-efficacy, personal resilience, and coping skills will be better equipped to deal with the obstacles and problems that come with the academic shift (Bandura, 1997; Girelli et al., 2018; Wilson, Babcock, & Saklofske, 2001). Successful students take charge of their education by implementing cognitive and motivational methods to self-regulate and constructively improve their knowledge. Students who are unable to overcome the initial hurdles of adaption will show poor levels of academic accomplishment and satisfaction (Jansen & Van De Grift, 2018). For open and distance learning students, engagement and motivation in learning are critical factors in guaranteeing student success. Such thing can be achieved through a number of teaching and learning methodologies. Students are forced to stop studying for various reasons that are varied and complex. It can be influenced by individual situations and the nature of specific institutions (Beer & Lawson, 2016). Retention is also driven by long term goals and issues with high expectations (Cooke, 2007). The students' family history, individual characteristics/abilities, unsatisfactory prior educational experiences, inadequate preparation for higher education, personal circumstances, and goal commitment are all factors to consider (Tinto, 1975; Jensen, 2011).



Objectives

This paper looks at student retention in OUM. It reviews the efforts of the university to consider factors that retain students at OUM. It focuses on undergraduate students who have spent their time studying at OUM for more than two years. Even during the Pandemic, OUM is still able to maintain its active student numbers to more than 27,000 as of 2020. The research attempts to find whether motivation and goal commitment significantly influence students' retention in OUM. In that case, this research investigates whether there is any positive relationship between motivation and goal commitment towards retention efforts for students in the university.

Retention Rates

It has always been the concern of institutions to retain the greatest possible number of students in distance learning. Student retention and attrition rates have all been a concern of institutions worldwide (Rwegasira K, 1988). 83% of OUM students are from undergraduate programmes. The undergraduate programmes consist of Diploma and Bachelor's Degree. In other words, this has shown that major revenue for OUM comes from this group of students. Thus, the focus must be emphasised to ensure undergraduate students could retain and sustain with OUM. Therefore, the institution needs to understand the contributing factors influencing students' retention in OUM to ensure the institution's revenue growth and sustainability.

Method and Measures

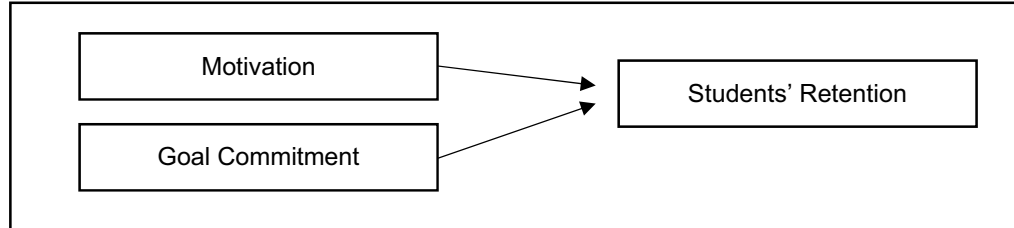
A survey has been conducted among OUM undergraduate students'. Respondents were students from various programmes, and focus was given to the diploma and bachelor degree students. Stratified sampling was used in this study to distribute to six learning centres. The analysis was conducted for each of the ideas in ensuring the reliability of the instrument using SmartPLS. The online method monitoring survey questionnaire was distributed to 130 undergraduate students, and 79 of them have responded. The questionnaire was distributed to 6 learning centres: Ipoh, Seberang Jaya, Kuching, Johor Bahru, Seremban, and Kuantan. There are 4 sections in the questionnaire. The first section consisted of 6 questions related to socio-demographic and academic characteristics of the students. The second section asked students about their motivation with 12 questions. The third section was on goal commitment with 9 questions, and the fourth section was on student retention with 8 questions. Individual aspects/elements of students (i.e. motivation, goal commitment and students' retention) were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (lowest skill) to 5 (highest value). According to (Hair et al, 2010) the sample size achieved the minimum requirement of 1 dependent variable to 10 samples (1:10). The response rate was 60.8% which is acceptable for this study.



Conceptual Model

Figure 1

The Conceptual Model of This Study



Research Findings

Table 1

Socio-demographic and Academic Characteristics of the Survey Respondents

Socio-demographic and Academic Characteristics	Number	%
Age		
21 - 30	24	31%
31 - 40	32	41%
41 - 50	22	27%
Above 50	1	1%
Gender		
Male	37	47%
Female	42	53%
Race		
Malay	33	42%
Chinese	17	21%
Indian	23	29%
Others	6	8%
Level of Study		
Diploma	5	6%
Degree	74	94%
Year of study		
2 years	1	1%
3 years	17	22%
4 years	39	49%
5 years	17	22%
Above 5 years	5	6%
Cluster of study		
Cluster Business Management	12	15%
Cluster Education and Social Science	39	50%
Cluster Applied Science	28	35%

The socio-demographic and other characteristics of the study population are shown in Table 1. More female students have responded to the survey, which comprised 53%, and the highest age population fall in the age range of 31 - 40 years, followed by the age range 21 - 30 years. Most of the respondents were Malays (42%), followed by Indians (29%) and Chinese (21%). Almost all of the respondents are pursuing Degree programmes (94%). Half of the respondents were in the Cluster of Education and Social Sciences (50%), Cluster of Applied Sciences (35%) and Cluster of Business and Management (15%). The majority of respondents were in the 4-year duration of the study (49%), 3 years and 5 years comprising 22% respectively and those above 5-year duration of study comprise 6%.

The analysis in this study is conducted using the SmartPLS Program. There are two basic evaluations. First, evaluating the measurement model (outer model) to find out the validity and reliability of indicators that measure latent variables; the instrument validity and reliability test criteria in this study refer to discriminant validity, convergent validity, and composite reliability. Second, assess the inner model or structural model to see the relationship between constructs, the significance value, and the research model's R-square. Testing Inner model in PLS analysis is done through bootstrap resampling.

According to (Hair et al, 2014) Cronbach alpha with less than 0.60 is considered poor, while 0.70 is acceptable. In contrast, Cronbach alpha over 0.80 is more reliable. In agreement with (Nunnally, 1978), the value of Cronbach's alpha should be 0.700 or above. According to (Gerrard; Cunningham & Devlin, 2006) some of the studies also considered 0.600 as an acceptable value. In this study, Cronbach's alpha is more than 0.9, which is highly reliable as the value is more than 0.70.

Table 2

Cronbach's Alpha

No	Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Goal commitment	0.941
2	Motivation	0.910
3	Student retention	0.888

A measurement model is an assessment of the validity and reliability of research variables. There are three criteria for assessing the outer models: discriminant validity, composite reliability, and convergent validity. Based on the three criteria for measuring the measurement model from the results bootstrapping in the PLS method, testing the measurement model for each indicator that reflects the construct or latent variable can be explained as follows.

Discriminant validity in this research used the score square root of average (AVE) to test whether the research instrument is valid in explaining or reflecting latent variables. Discriminant validity used is square root of average variance extracted (\sqrt{AVE}). Suppose the square root of the average variance extracted (\sqrt{AVE}) value of each variable is greater than the correlation value between the latent variable and other latent variables. In that case, the instrument variable is said to be a valid discriminant. This study finds it essential to assess further its discriminant validity that is complementary to the prior assessments.

**Table 3***Average Variance Extracted (AVE)*

No	Construct	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
1	Goal commitment	0.738
2	Motivation	0.689
3	Student retention	0.749

According to (Hair, Sarstedt & Ringle, 2017) the average variance extracted (AVE) of each latent construct should 0.5 or higher. Test results in Table 3 show that the value of average variance extracted (AVE) are more than 0.5. All constructs showed a satisfactory explanation of more than 50% of variances of its items ranging from 0.689 to 0.738.

The result from the square root of average variance extracted (\sqrt{AVE}) values of all variables is greater than the correlation between latent variables and other latent variables so that the instruments of each variable are valid discriminant. In compliance with Fornell-Larker's criterion, this study is keen to report that the constructs and items used in this study had confirmed their discriminant validity.

Convergent validity measures the validity of an indicator as a measure of construct, which can be seen from outer loading. The value outer loading can also be interpreted as the contribution of each indicator to the latent variable. Outer loading of an indicator with the highest value means that the indicator is the strongest measure of the latent variable in question. More clearly follows the results of the analysis and evaluation of measurement models for each research variable.

Table 4*Outer Loading Each Indicator*

	Goal Commitments	Student Motivation	Student Retention
GC1	0.867		
GC3	0.829		
GC4	0.899		
GC5	0.896		
GC6	0.884		
GC7	0.777		
GC8	0.856		
M11		0.860	
M12		0.862	
M2		0.820	
M3		0.836	
M6		0.799	
M7		0.802	
SR3			0.846
SR4			0.886
SR5			0.877
SR6			0.853

All indicators in each variable have value outer loading above 0.70, which means that the indicators are valid and able to measure latent variables.

Composite reliability tests the value reliability between the indicators of the construct that constitutes it. Results are composite reliability said to be good if the value is above 0.70. Test results of composite reliability the measurement model are presented in Table 4.

Table 5

Composite Reliability of Constructs

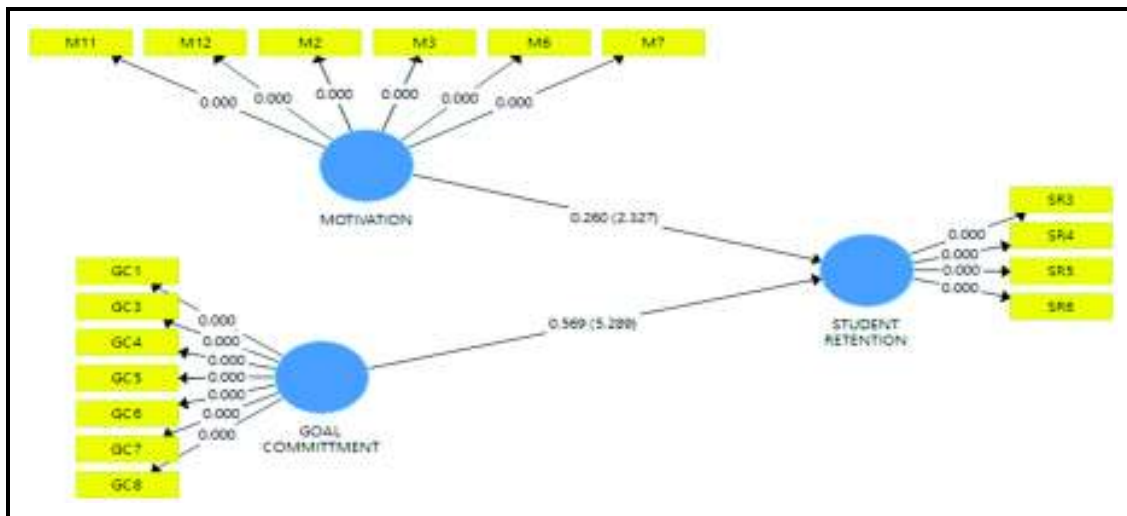
No.	Construct	Composite Reliability
1	Goal commitment	0.952
2	Motivation	0.930
3	Student retention	0.923

Table 5 shows that the value of composite reliability of all variables are above 0.70. These results mean that the 3 latent variables analysed have good composite reliability, and it is concluded that all instruments used in this study have met the criteria or are suitable for use in the measurement of: goal commitment, motivation, and student retention.

The following table showed the result of direct hypotheses. The result supported 2 hypotheses. Student motivation and goal commitment towards student retention.

Figure 2

Coefficient on Relationships Diagram



**Table 6***Path Coefficient on Relationships*

Relationship	Original Sample (β)	T Statistics	P-Values	Decision
Goal commitments -> Student retention	0.569	5.289	0.030	Supported
Student motivation-> Student retention	0.260	2.327	0.020	Supported

Table 6 explains the assessment of the relationship between goal commitment, motivation, and student retention. The value of the path coefficient for the goal commitments to student retention was β 0.569, while the result of t-value and p-value shows that the relationship between student commitments and student retention is significant (t-value = 5.289; p-value 0.030).

The value of the path coefficient for student motivation was β = 0.260. The t-value and p-value indicated that the relationship between student motivation and student retention is significant (t-value 2.327; p-value 0.020).

Conclusion

This paper emphasises the importance of motivation and goal commitment towards retaining students in the institution. Higher education worldwide is affected by Covid-19 pandemic and billions of students has to stay at home to continue their study. The institution and academics must maintain their morale support to encourage and guide the students to success. This article can potentially be used as a starting point for future research on the impact of Covid-19 on educational performance. This is also important to the sustainability of the institution. Future research should evaluate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on other factors that impacted the educational system and the general population.

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