

## Persistence and Performance: Does Prior Learning Really Matter?

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### Abstract

*The open entry system introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2006 has paved the way for greater access into the Malaysian higher education and lifelong learning opportunities. The move was in line with the Strategic Plan of Higher Education 2007-2010, which focuses on the Intensification of the 'Development of Human Capital'. Open University Malaysia (OUM), Malaysia's first open and distance learning institution was opportune to head start the implementation of open entry system in the country. Through open entry, individuals who did not meet the conventional entry requirements to enter into an institution of higher learning have now the opportunity to leverage on their prior learning and work experience for this purpose. Upon admission into the OUM programme, the open entry learners will not be differentiated in any manner from the normal entry learners. However, these learners who may have left school for a number of years, and lack some basic skills, such as languages and Mathematics, now face even greater challenges of meeting the demands of the academia as well as pressure to perform at par with their peers. The need to examine the persistency as well as performance for this group of learners becomes crucial to ensure that they are able to cope well in the new ODL environment and are able to sustain their motivation and commitment throughout their study programme. The study was conducted based on secondary data derived from the Admission and Record Unit and the Examination Unit of OUM. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The paper attempts to examine (i) the persistency level; and (ii) performance results of the normal entry learners and open entry learners and (iii) the extent to which differences may exist between the two groups. Findings from this early evaluation will provide useful insights in two aspects. Firstly, it will serve as a reality check on the effectiveness of the open entry practices in an ODL setting and secondly, it is important to learn about the success/failure rates of open entry learners so that the institution can make necessary and appropriate adjustments, particularly in its (a) student support provision and (b) attention to student success.*

### Introduction

One of the most significant milestones in Malaysia's higher education development was the introduction of the open entry system. The system based on the underpinning lifelong learning policy, is a fundamental principle in the Malaysian Qualifications Framework. In line with the Strategic Plan of Higher Education 2007-2010, the implementation of open entry will widen access to higher education and contribute to the nation's effort towards creating a more knowledgeable workforce and development of human capital in the country.

The concept of open entry, derived from the philosophy of recognition of prior learning (RPL), acknowledges learning gained through formal, non-formal and informal means and allows an alternative access to higher education with less restrictive entry requirements compared to conventional universities. Open University Malaysia (OUM), Malaysia's pioneer open and distance learning university is the first institution of higher learning to be granted the approval by the Ministry of Higher Education to implement open entry in 2006.

## **Open Entry at OUM**

OUM, established as the seventh private university in Malaysia in 2000, aspires to be the leading provider of flexible learning in the country. It advocates on its mission, “To widen access to quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities by leveraging on technology, adopting a flexible mode of learning, and providing a conducive and engaging learning environment at a competitive and affordable cost”. OUM grew from a humble beginning of 753 learners in 2001 and to date takes pride with more than 87,200 learners in 67 learning centres throughout Malaysia.

OUM’s value corresponds with the philosophy of open entry – that is to democratize and make education accessible to all. It enables admission opportunities for adult learners who possess vast working experience but yet lack the minimal qualifications to enter into a university programme. The Centre for Assessment of Prior Learning, formerly known as School of Lifelong Learning, was specifically established and positioned to be the centre for implementation of open entry and recognition of prior learning. Its formation reflects the commitment of the university to ensure and uphold quality and compliance to the Malaysia Qualifications Agency guidelines on open entry and RPL practices. Open Entry was launched by the Minister of Higher Education, YBhg. Dato’ Mustapha Mohamed in May 2006 and has since registered more than 2,000 learners at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Despite the increasing number of enrolment through open entry, the need to track the persistency level and performance of this group of learners becomes imperative. Open entry learners are often perceived to have lower persistency level and performance compared to their normal entry peers. These learners may lack some basic skills, such as language and numeric competencies that are fundamental to their academic progress. It is crucial to ensure that they are able to cope in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment and are able to sustain their motivation and commitment throughout their study programmes. Hence, their ability to cope with the demands of the academia and pressure to perform at par with their peers becomes the subject of interest to the institution.

This paper attempts to examine (i) the persistency level and (ii) performance results of both the open entry and normal entry learners and (iii) the extent to which differences may exist between the two groups.

Findings of the study will provide useful insights in two aspects. Firstly, it will serve as a reality check on the effectiveness of the open entry practices in an ODL setting and secondly, it is important to learn about the success/failure rates of open entry learners so that the institution can make necessary and appropriate adjustments, particularly in its (a) student support provision and (b) attention to student success.

## **Literature Review**

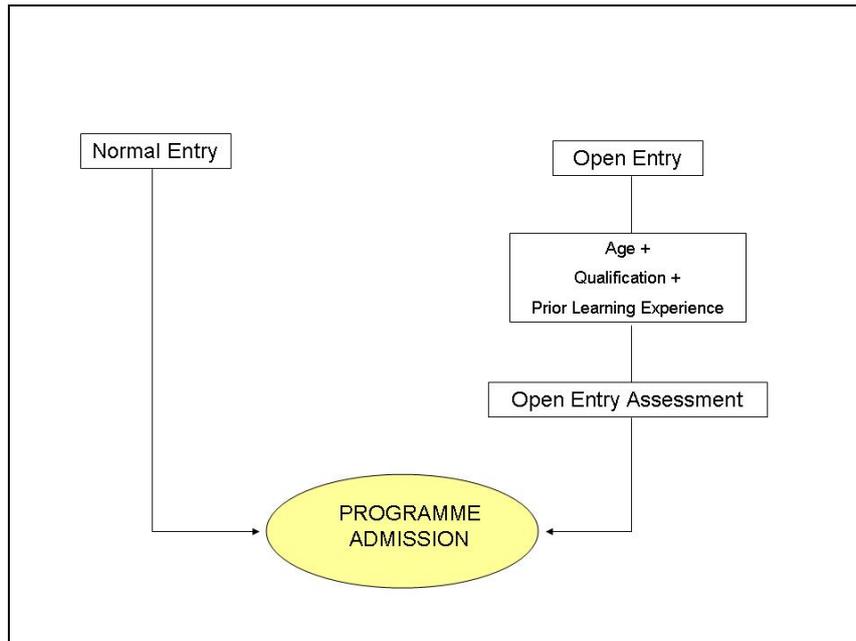
### **Open Entry Journey**

At OUM, open entry offers an alternative route for admission into a university programme with less restrictive entry requirements compared to conventional entry criteria. It leverages on the individual’s prior learning acquired through formal/informal training, life or work experience and compensates for the lack in academic qualifications. All learners at OUM, irrespective of their means of admission, will receive the same learning services and assessments until they graduate. There will not be any bias in terms of quality or services for one admission path over the other.

Admission through open entry must satisfy the criteria outlined by the Ministry of Higher Education; namely age and academic qualification. Candidates who wish to pursue an undergraduate programme must be at least 21 years of age on the year of application and possess a minimum PMR/SRP/LCE qualification or its equivalent. For programmes at the Masters level, candidates must be at least 35

years of age and possess a minimum qualification of STPM/HSC/A-levels or its equivalent. (Code of Practice for Quality Assurance the Open Entry Admission System, National Accreditation Board, 2006). Candidates must also possess prior learning experience in the programme of interest as well as pass the Open Entry Assessment conducted by the university. These stringent measures undertaken were necessary to ensure adherence to the national guidelines as well as quality in the assessment mechanism. Figure 1 illustrates the Open Entry journey at OUM.

Figure 1: The Open Entry Journey at OUM



Tremendous improvements to the assessment methods have been ongoing so as to better reflect its ability to gauge the learners’ experience, readiness, interest and motivation to pursue a programme. The Open Entry Assessment comprises of an Entrance Test and an Aptitude Test. Candidates must pass both tests before they are allowed to enroll into the OUM programme. Despite its stringent rules and rigorous processes, the number of open entry candidates has increased from 208 in 2006 to more than 2,000 learners in 2009. The effectiveness of open entry is reflected by the increasing number of enrollment, increasing re-registration rate from one semester to the other as well as improvement in learners’ performance.

**Learners’ Study Cycle**

The normal study cycle that all OUM learners go through begins with registration. Prior to the first tutorial, all new learners will have to attend a compulsory Learning Skills Workshop. In this half-day workshop session, learners will be introduced to the important aspects of learning in an open and distance environment. This includes hands-on sessions on how to access the OUM Learning Management system, myLMS and the Digital Library. The main objective of the learning skills workshop is to provide the initial confidence, motivation and to make them feel at ease before coming to their first face-to-face tutorial session. Thereafter, tutors and academic staff will take them through the five tutorial sessions. This stage is clearly important in influencing learners' perceptions of their experience with the institution, but it is by no means the only critical stage in a learner's journey from registration to graduation. Administrative staff is also key players during *all* stages of the learner study cycle. It is crucial to provide the relevant support services to help them move seamlessly through their journey in an ODL environment.

There are several critical points along the study cycle, where learners may decide to temporarily opt out of the study due to some constraints, such as time management, work pressures, family pressures, or simply not able to cope with the study demands. These are the attrition points. For example, after the first tutorial, there will be quite a number who would defer or quit because they find that ODL is not suitable for them. For those who sail through without any problem, the next hurdle comes at the mid-semester exam or at the fourth tutorial when their assignments are due. Many learners who fail to meet the deadline will call it off at this stage because they know that their chances of passing without the coursework marks are very slim. Yet another bigger hurdle comes at the final examination time. Though OUM provides assistance by conducting examination clinics to learners taking difficult or 'high risk' courses, some still find it difficult to cope.

Thus, along the learner study cycle, there are several attrition points, such as after tutorial 1; at mid-semester examination; at tutorial 4 and at final examination. However, learners who have gone through the whole spectrum of the study cycle, and have passed or failed their examinations, will come to an even more critical point, that is the re-registration for the next semester.

## Methodology

Secondary data obtained from the Admission and Records Unit as well as Examination Unit of OUM was used in this study. Data gathered were analysed using descriptive statistics. Learners' persistency was measured by the re-registration rate of learners for each semester, the average re-registration rate as well as the examination sitting rate. Performance, on the other hand was measured in terms of the learners' cumulative grade point average (CGPA).

## Results and Discussions

### *Total enrolment*

Statistics of the total OUM undergraduate intake for normal entry and open entry from January 2008 till May 2009 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Total Enrolment for Open Market Intakes

<b>OPEN MARKET INTAKES</b>			
<b>INTAKE</b>	<b>TOTAL INTAKE</b>	<b>NORMAL ENTRY (%)</b>	<b>OPEN ENTRY (%)</b>
January 2008	2030	1632 (80.4)	398 (19.6)
May 2008	2013	1683 (83.6)	330 (16.4)
September 2008	1511	1239 (82.0)	272 (18.0)
January 2009	2550	2114 (82.9)	436 (17.1)
May 2009	2251	1824 (81.0)	427 (19.0)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10355</b>	<b>8492 (82.0)</b>	<b>1863 (18.0)</b>

*Source: Admission & Records Unit, 2009*

From the table, it can be observed that the number of learners entering the university through normal or open entry has been on an increasing trend. The overall open market intake for 2009 (January and

May: 4801 learners) has also increased (18.75%) as compared to the similar period in 2008 (January and May 2008: 4043 learners). Generally, over the period of study, it was observed that more than 80% of OUM learners entered the university using the conventional or normal route while learners who enter through the open entry system accounts for almost 20% for each intake of the study. The uprising trend in open entry is expected to increase as working adults become more aware of the available opportunities to pursue higher education by using working experience to compensate for the lack of minimum academic entry requirements.

*Persistence Level*

Persistence level in this study is measured by the re-registration rate, average re-registration rate and the examination sitting rate. Re-registration rate which is expressed in percentage is the proportion of active learner in the previous semester who registers in the present semester multiplied by 100. The higher the re-registration rate, the higher the persistence level. When previous semester learners re-register themselves for the present semester, it indicates that they are ready to progress further in their study programme. It is crucial to monitor the changes that take place during learners study cycle, so that the institution can make necessary and appropriate adjustments, particularly in its student support provision and by paying extra attention to student success.

FIGURE 2: Average Re-Registration Rate of Open vs Normal Entry Learners

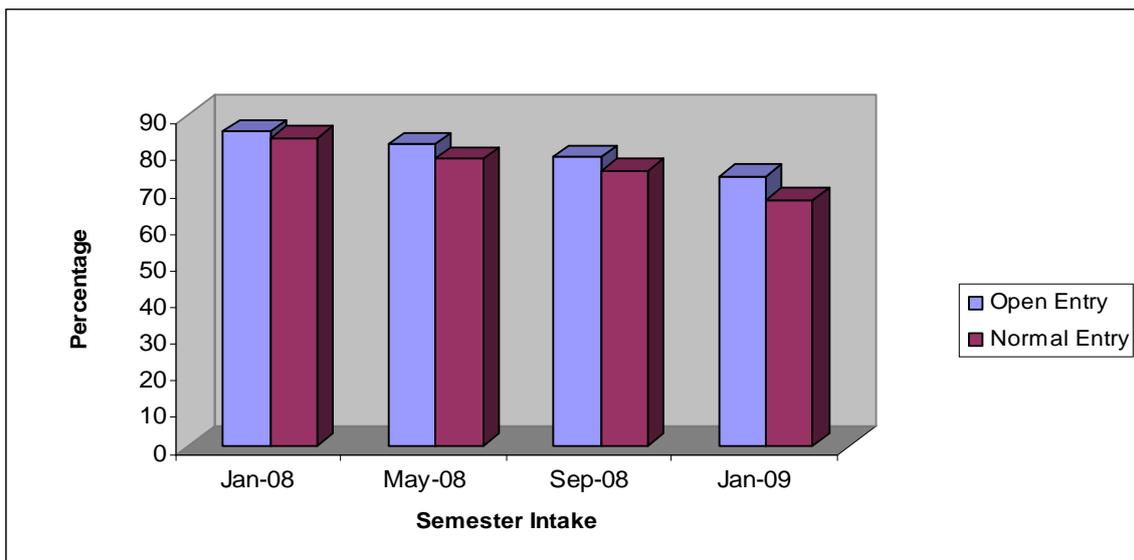


Figure 2 shows the average re-registration rate (sum of re-registration rate at every semester over the total number of semesters for each intake) of open entry learners and normal entry learners from January 2008 till January 2009. From the figure, it can be observed that the average re-registration rate for open entry learners (80.0%) exceed those of their normal entry counterpart (76.2%).

FIGURE 3: Average First Semester Re-Registration Rate of Open vs Normal Entry Learners

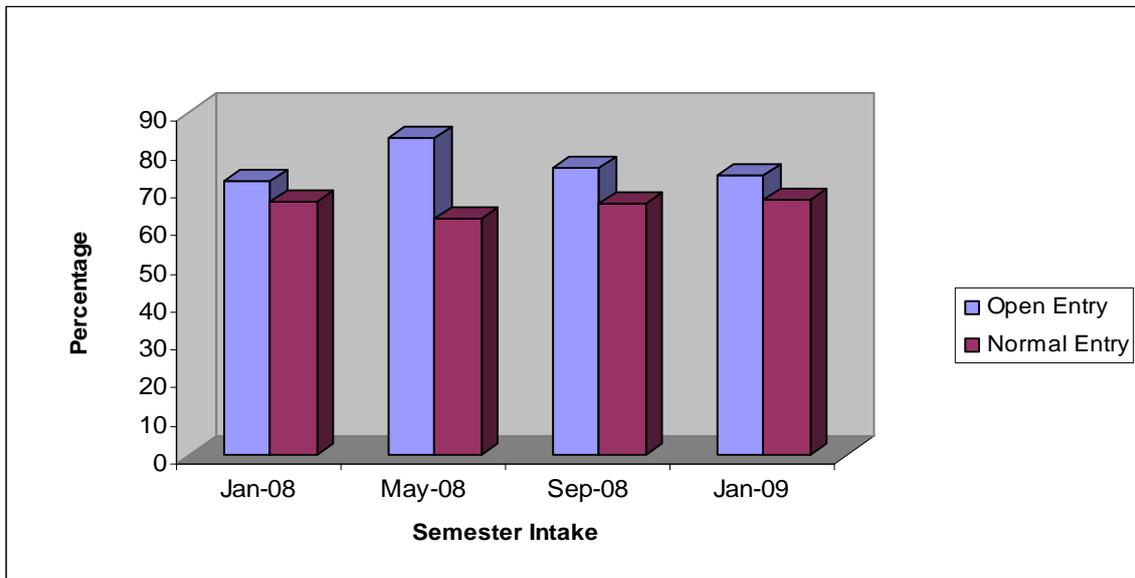


Figure 3 shows the average re-registration rate for the first semester for both groups of learners. Over the period of the study, it was observed that the average first semester re-registration rate of open entry learners (76.1%) is higher than that of the normal entry learners (65.5%).

FIGURE 4: Average Second Semester Re-Registration Rate of Open vs Normal Entry Learners

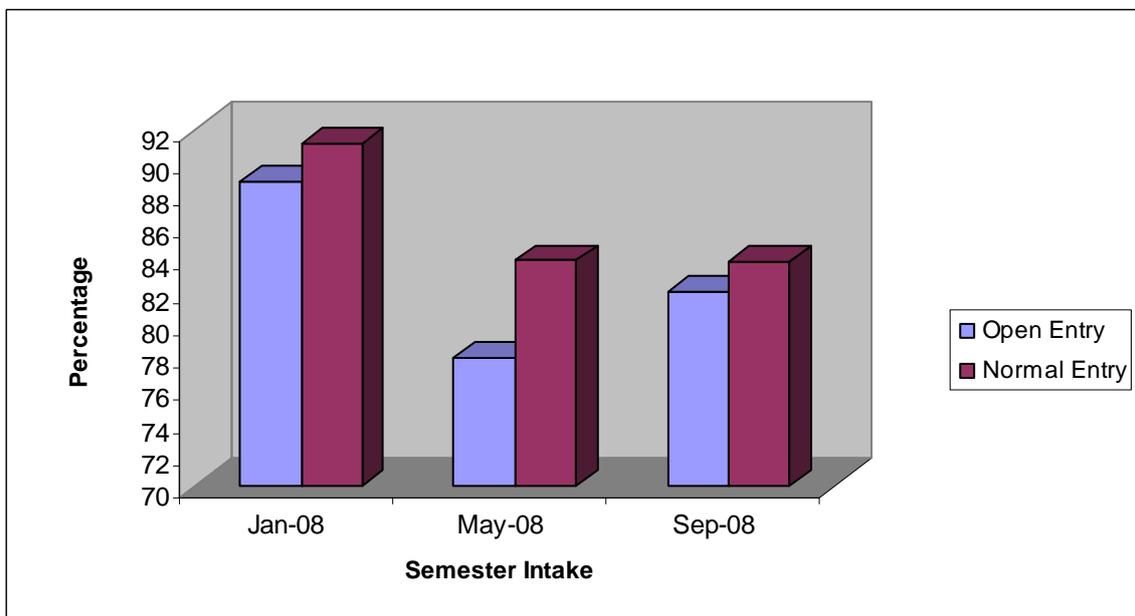
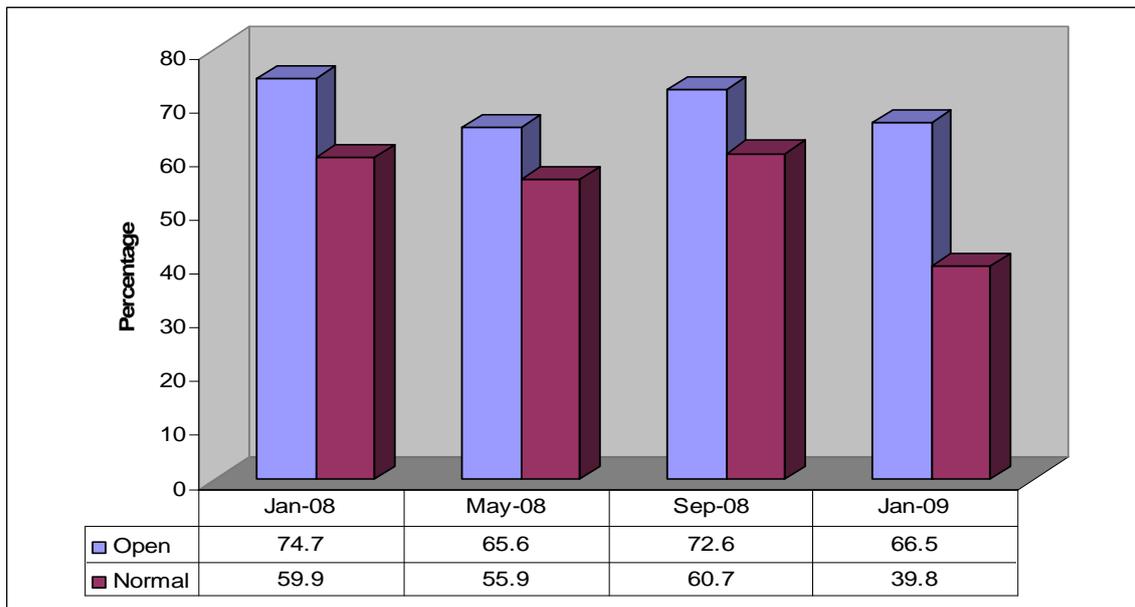


Figure 4 displays the average second semester re-registration rate. In this figure, we observed that the open entry learner group has lower re-registration rate compared to the normal entry learner. The average second semester re-registration rate for open entry learners is 82.9% and 86.3% for the normal entry learners. Although the re-registration rate for the open entry learner has decreased relatively as compared the normal entry learners, in the third semester of their study, it is gratifying to know that these percentages are higher compared to the average re-registration rate for the first

semester. It is commonly known among ODL institutions that persistence rate is usually lowest in the first semester of study. The data from this study supported the claim as the average first semester re-registration rate is lower than that of the average second semester re-registration rate.

Another measure of persistency level is the examination sitting rate. The examination sitting rate is a ratio of total number of learners with grades to the total intake. The rate would indicate the number of learners who sat for the examination in a particular semester. The higher the examination sitting rate, the higher the persistency level. Persistent learners have the tendency to endure till the end of the course. Among reasons for low examination sitting rate are learners who withdraw from the course or did not complete the other assessments, as well as those who decide to defer the semester or quit from the programme.

FIGURE 5: Examination Sitting Rate



The examination sitting rate is illustrated in Figure 5. For the open entry group, the rates range from 65.6% to 74.7%. On the other hand, normal entry learners showed an examination sitting rate ranging from 39.8% to 60.7% over the same period of study. The average examination sitting rate for open entry learners of 69.9% is very much higher compared to that of the normal entry learners of 54.1%, with a difference of 15.8%.

Generally, open entry learners display higher persistency level compared to their normal entry peers. This is indicated by their higher re-registration and examination sitting rates from the study. The higher persistency level could be attributable to the fact that these groups of learners are more committed and willing to work hard to achieve their goals and they persist on taking full opportunity to continue their education. However, further investigation will have to be conducted to determine the actual reasons for their perseverance and motivation.

*Performance*

The Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) has been widely used as a yardstick to measure learner performance over the period of their study. In OUM, learners must achieve a CGPA of more than 2.00 upon completion of the required number of credits to graduate. Learners with CGPA below 2.00 are categorized as “At Risk” learners while those with CGPA more than 3.66 are categorized as “excellent” achievers.

Figure 6 and Figure 7 illustrate the average percentage of learners with CGPA < 2.00 and CGPA > 3.66 respectively from January 2008 until January 2009 semester. The word average here refers to the total percentage of learners with CGPA < 2.00 or CGPA > 3.66 for each intake in every semester over the total number of semesters that learners have gone through.

FIGURE 6: Average Percentage of Learners with CGPA < 2.00

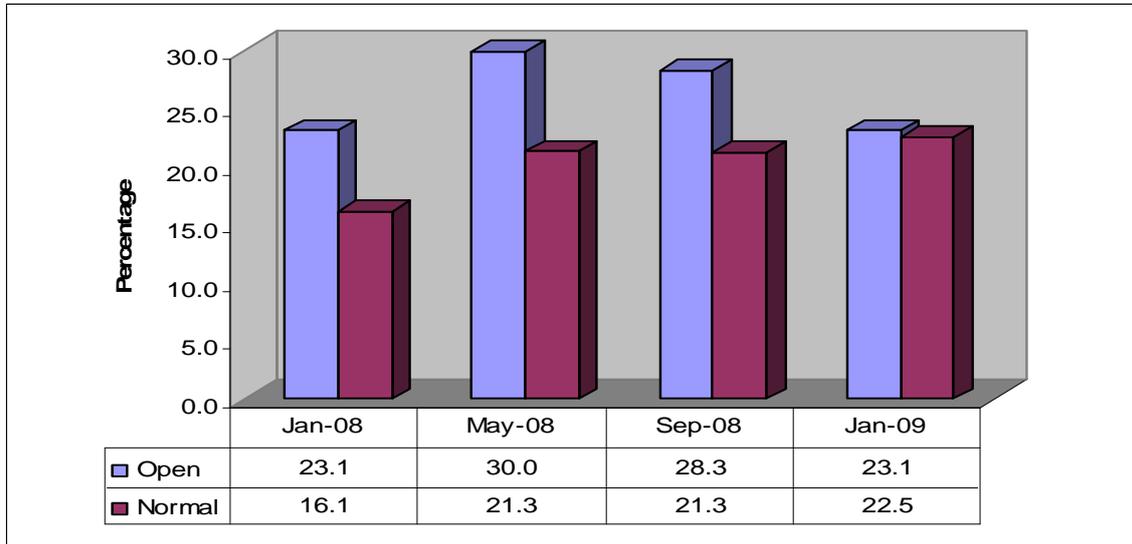


Figure 6 shows the average percentage for learners with CGPA < 2.00. For the open entry group, the percentages of learners who performed below par ranges from 23.1% to 30% whilst the percentages of normal entry learners for the same category ranges from 16.1% to 22.5%. Generally, the percentage of failures (CGPA < 2.00) is higher among the open entry (Av=26.1%) compared to that of the normal entry learners (Av=20.3%). Learners who are categorized as “At Risk”, are continuously monitored to ensure that they improve their performance and continue to progress through the programme, via either the face-to-face or online academic counseling carried out by trained tutors. At risk learners are also given special coaching in examination clinic sessions, which focus on difficult courses, held at all learning centres.

FIGURE 7: Average Percentage of Learners with CGPA > 3.66

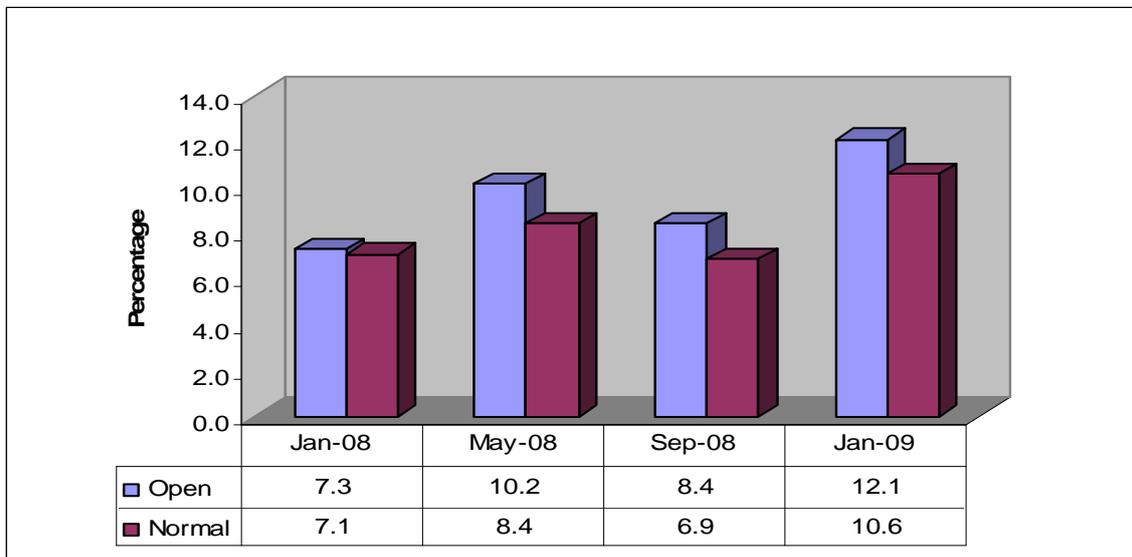


Figure 7, in contrast, displays the average percentage of “*Excellent*” learners for both the open and normal entry groups. To be “*Excellent*”, these learners must have CGPAs of more than 3.66. The average percentages of open entry learner who excel ranges from 7.3% to 12.1% as compared to the normal entry learners whose range were between 6.9% and 10.6%. Generally open entry learners outperformed their normal entry peers for all semesters in the study period. On the average, the percentage of high achievers is higher among the open entry learners (9.5%) compared to the normal entry learners (8.3%).

The study also revealed that while the excellent achievers for open entry outnumbered the normal entry group, there were also more low performers comparatively. For the open entry group, the percentages of high achievers range from 7.3% to 12.1% compared to its low performers which ranges from 23.1% to 30%. On an average, the ratio for high achievers to low performers was 0.37: 1. For the normal entry group, the percentages of high achievers range from 6.9% to 10.6% compared to its low performers which ranges from 16.1% to 22.5%. On an average, the ratio for high achiever to low performers was 0.41:1. Here we can conclude that generally, normal entry learners performed better compared to the open entry learners. This is of course what is expected.

## Conclusion

Admission through Open Entry practiced by OUM is indeed ideal in that it provides an opportunity to as many people as possible to undertake higher education for personal and professional development. Once learners are offered a place, the University guides the learners appropriately and provides them with a variety of options that would serve their personal skills, needs and goals. After guidance has been given in terms of appropriate information, the onus reverts to the students to act accordingly so that they attain success in their study programme.

This study reveals that the open entry learners need to be given special attention, guidance and support, particularly at the third semester, when the average re-registration rate starts to decline. This also indicates that whatever OUM has provided to these learners, right from the beginning of their study semester, there needs to be a continuous and a concerted effort in tracking and monitoring these learners, otherwise little credence is given to the laudable ideals of OUM as the first ODL institution in the country to open its doors to learning.

The study also indicates that although the persistency levels for open entry learners exceed those of the normal entry learners, their performance were relatively lower. However, this does not necessarily mean that open entry learners are inferior compared to their normal peers in terms of performance as the differences found were rather marginal. The study concluded that despite lacking in terms of the academic entry qualifications, the open entry learners were able to cope with the demands of their programmes and they could perform almost at par with their normal entry peers. Being highly motivated and goal oriented the open entry learners should continue to leverage on their working experience and persevere until they complete the programme. At the same time, the institution will continue its effort to monitor this group and provide appropriate intervention where necessary. Future studies will continue to trace the performance of open entry learners on a longitudinal basis and look into factors that drive the high persistency and performance levels. This would then dispel the myth that open entry learners are inferior compared to their normal entry counterpart.

## References

1. Code of Practice for Quality Assurance the Open Entry Admission System, National Accreditation Board, 2006.
2. Centre for assessment of Prior Learning Website: <http://www.capl.oum.edu.my>
3. Ministry of Higher Education Website: <http://www.mohe.gov.my>