A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON PERSISTENCY AND PERFORMANCE OF FLEXIBLE AND NORMAL ENTRY LEARNERS

Ahmad Izanee Awang
izanee@oum.edu.my

Nik Azlina Nik Yaacob
nikazlina@oum.edu.my

Kamariah Mohd Noor
kamariah@oum.edu.my

Open University Malaysia

Abstract

Flexible entry system which has been implemented at OUM has widened opportunities to many people whom did not fulfil basic entry requirements to further their studies at higher level. Through flexible entry, individuals who have less qualification are now able to use their prior learning and work experience for admission into the University. At the University, learners who came in through Flexible Entry (FE) are given the same treatment as those who came in through Normal Entry (NE). The need to compare the persistency and performance for these groups of learners are important to the University as it provides indication on learners' persistency and their academic performance so that necessary intervention can be taken. The study was conducted based on secondary data derived from the Admission and Record Unit and the Assessment and Examination Division of OUM.

Keywords: *Flexible entry, normal entry, academic performance, persistence*

Introduction

As a developing country, Malaysia aspires to create knowledge society with at least 30% of its people attained tertiary education by the year 2020. One of the initiatives taken by the government is to widen access to higher education among the community which is known as the democratization of education. Lifelong learning system in Malaysia is complementary to the system of higher education that can produce knowledgeable and skilled people. Lifelong learning provides more opportunities and choices to improve the quality of life of individuals.

To accomplish these goals, the government has taken several steps through its Strategic Plan of Higher Education 2007-2010. These include introducing open and flexible method of entry for those who wish to pursue higher studies at higher education institutions. OUM is one of the pioneer universities in the country that introduce such method. Through open and flexible method, the opportunity to continue their studies to a higher level is also open to anyone who does not have the minimum entry qualifications, but could use work experience plus other determined criteria.

This flexible entry system has received increasingly favourable response from the community in this country, especially working adults. Despite the increasing number of enrolment through open entry, the need to track the 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 who may have left school for a number of years, plus very minimal academic background and lack some basic skills now face even greater challenges of meeting the demands of the academia as well as pressure to perform at par with their peers. They 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 (Latifah, Mansor & Lilian, 2009).

Previous study was conducted by Latifah, Mansor and Lilian (2009) 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. However, the study was limited to data gathered from the first few semesters of studies.

This paper attempts to further extend the scope of study by looking at the performance of learners throughout the entire study program. The persistency in activities and performance of flexible entry learners were compared with those from normal entry beginning from the first to the fourteenth semester (4½ years of study) of the programme in which learner should be completing their studies.

Literature Review

The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) introduced the Open Entry System as an alternative admission route for non-conventional learners to undertake studies at institutions of higher learning in the country. OUM was selected to spearhead this initiative in 2006. Under the Open Entry System, applicants who do not meet the academic criteria for first degree studies at conventional universities, can now leverage on their prior learning and work experience. Although the admission requirement is relatively less stringent, the applicants are still subjected to other admission criteria namely age, a minimum qualification and an assessment of prior learning.

The majority (95%) of learners at OUM are working adults. Of this total, 70% of them are between the ages of 30 to 50 years (Ng, Izanee, Latifah & Ramli, 2008). Most of them have left the formal education more than 10 years. In addition, OUM learners have diverse employment backgrounds. Some are employed in managerial and decision-makers, and others who work as clerical or junior staff. As such, they have a different exposure in terms of the nature of the jobs. There are those who work in financial and accounting sector of who always play around with figures and mathematics, while others who work in the public sector or administration without playing around with figures and calculations. These factors influence the persistency of learners in their studies.

Persistence (the opposite of dropout) was conceived as to whether or not a student re-enrolled in the same program for the next academic year, be it in the first year of the program, the second year of the program or through an individualized program. Persistence is therefore a dichotomous variable. The definition of persistence was mainly chosen because students tend to not inform the university college when they drop out of the program. Therefore re-enrolment for the next academic year is the first occasion the university college is sure as to whether or not a student has dropped out of the program.

For entry into an Undergraduate Degree Programme, an applicant must be at least 21 years of age and possess a minimum Lower Certificate of Education/Sijil Rendah Pelajaran/Penilaian Menengah Rendah while to enter into a Postgraduate Degree Programme, the applicant must have reached the age of 35 and possess a minimum academic qualification of Diploma/A-Levels/Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia. The applicants will also be required to undertake the Flexible Entry Assessment whereby their prior learning and work experience will be assessed to examine their ability, interest and readiness to pursue the programme of choice.

The whole admission process is illustrated in the diagram below:
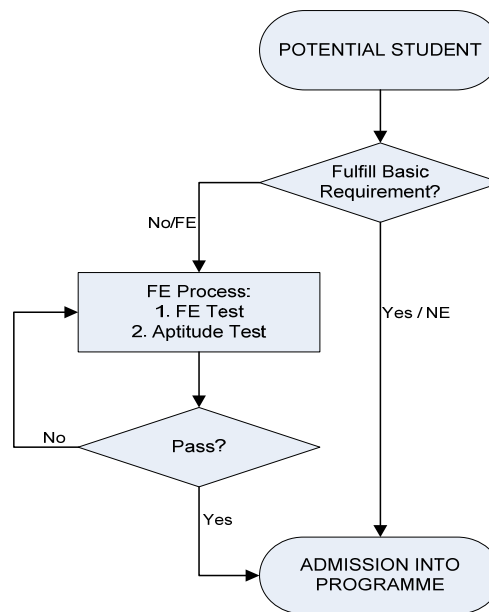
Diagram 1: Learner admission process into OUM

At present, more than 4,000 learners have enrolled into OUM programmes through this route. In 2009, a study was conducted to compare the persistency and performance of OUM learners from the Open Entry System with those from the conventional route. The study indicated higher persistency and performance among the former compared to the latter (Latifah, Mansor & Kek, 2009).

Tinto's (1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) have suggested that learner's involvement, engagement and integration into the academic and social system of an institution are key factors in determining if the learners persist or drop out. They suggested that insufficient interactions of students with peers and faculty and differences with the prevailing value patterns of other students are also likely to result in dropouts.

According to Carr (2000), ODL institutions in general have higher attrition rates compared to traditional institutions which he estimated to be between 50 to 80 percent compared to about 40 percent among traditional institutions. One reason commonly cited is the feeling of isolation among open and distance learners (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Reisman, 2003; and Rovai et al., 2007).

Objectives

This paper attempts to achieve two objectives as follows:

1. To identify the differences of persistency in re-registration, assignment submission and examination sitting between flexible and normal entry learners.

2. To identify the difference of academic performance between flexible and normal entry learners.

Scope

The data of BHRM learners' January 2010 intake was used for this study. The analysis includes learners' data on the re-registration of a semester, assignment submissions, examination sittings and examination results of FE and NE learners. However, the earlier intakes were not considered in this study as the Flexible Entry Mode only started in the year 2007 and any new system needs time to stabilized in the environment and be promoted to the public.

While, the data collected were for a duration of 14 semesters or 4½ years of study (beginning January 2010 until May 2014). Though the duration of 14 semesters could be considered the common period required to complete a Bachelor's Degree, the duration may not be adequate for adult learners. Most of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions allow maximum duration of 8 years for learners to complete a Bachelor's programme.

Additionally, only learners' activities on re-registration for the semester, submission of assignment and sitting for examination were examined in this study. Other activities that may affect academic performance such as attending classes, participating in discussions and many other activities were not considered in this study. Also excluded are the external factors such as work and family commitments.

This preliminary study also does not carry out Correlation Analysis between persistence and performance. A more comprehensive study may be best conducted in another 3-4 years time, after which most of FE learners has completed their studies.

Research Questions

1. Is there any difference in learner's persistency in terms of re-registration, assignment submission and sitting for examination among those admitted through flexible entry as compared to those admitted through normal entry system?

2. Is there any difference in academic performance among those admitted through flexible entry as compared to those admitted through normal entry system?

Significance of the Study

Findings of the study will provide useful feedbacks to the university. Firstly, it will give some indications on learners' persistency in three dimensions of this study so that the institution can make necessary and appropriate actions.

Methodology

Data used in this research is a secondary data obtained from the Admissions and Records Unit and Assessment and Examinations Division of OUM. The data is obtained from January 2010 intake who enrolled in Bachelor of Human Resource Management (BHRM) programme. Three types of data are collected for this study. They are, 1) re-registration of a semester, 2) assignment submission, 3) final examination sittings, and 4) CGPA of learners in each semester.

The January 2010 Intake of learners were chosen because these learners have gone through a complete cycle of 14 semesters of study. This means this intake of learners is those who have followed the system completely and would have been able to complete their study.

While, BHRM program was chosen because it has a significant number of learners admitted through open entry system as well as normal entry system. Furthermore, the courses offered in this program are more theoretical, reading in nature and common to most people. Thus, achievement of learners in this program would reflect capabilities of most people.

Data are separated into two categories: learners who admitted through the open entry system and those through the normal system. These data were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Diagram 2 below is the framework of the study:
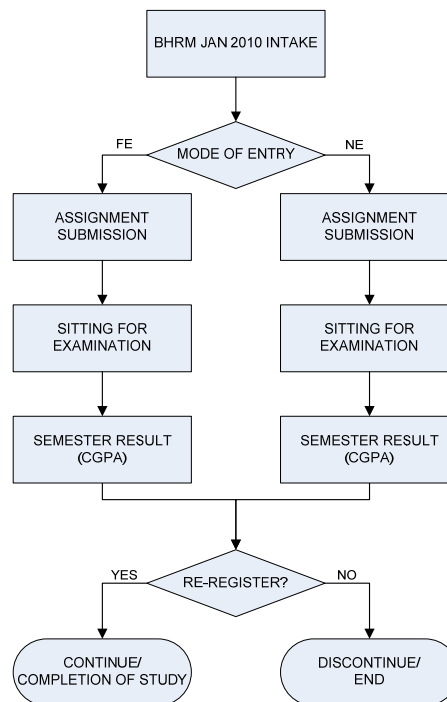
Diagram 2: Framework of study

Analysis

Persistence Level

(a) Re-registration Rate
Every semester, learners are required to re-register for subsequent semester. At OUM, registrations of courses were conducted through the University Online Registration System. The registration data collected helps the University in preparing modules, tutorial timetable, appointment of tutors and many other administrative purposes.

Table 1 below shows learners' re-registration record beginning second semester until the fourteenth semester of their study (May 2010 until May 2014). The re-registration data were tabulated according to semester and mode of entry. While, the re-registration rates were derived from the total number of learners who registered for a semester as compared to the total who first registered for the program.

Table 1: Re-registration Rate of BHRM January 2010 Intake

Semester	Normal Entry (NE)	Flexible Entry (FE)	Total
May10	75%	83%	76%
Sep10	72%	69%	71%
Jan11	62%	57%	61%
May11	54%	54%	54%
Sep11	48%	52%	49%
Jan12	48%	43%	47%
May12	41%	39%	41%
Sep12	38%	37%	38%
Jan13	34%	31%	34%
May13	32%	28%	31%
Sep13	28%	24%	27%
Jan14	23%	28%	24%
May14	20%	24%	20%

Generally, the table above shows a decreasing trend of re-registration rate for both type of learners coming through either FE or NE. The total re-registration rates for second semester were recorded at 76% and it started to decrease gradually until 20% at the fourteenth semester. It is clearly observed that fewer learners re-registered every semester as compared to the total numbers when learners first register for the program.

In addition, it is also noted that 9 out of 13 semesters recorded higher percentages of re-registration among NE as compared to FE learners. Thus, persistency of re-registration is higher among those who came in through NE mode as compared to FE learners.

(b)   Assignment Submission
At OUM, learners are given the option to register between one to three courses in a semester. The courses offered by the University mainly require learners to submit one assignment for each course.

Table 2 below depicted the persistency of FE and NE learners with regard to assignment submission. Analysis was conducted to identify disparity of assignment submissions among FE and NE learners. The level of persistency in submitting assignments were measured by looking at the percentage of total assignment submitted as oppose to total registration of courses in a semester.

The overall percentage of submission in the table below shows that 91.6% of assignments were submitted by both groups of learners. This reflects high persistency levels of assignment submission for both groups of learners. Comparatively, it is noted that there is a trend in submission of assignment. While, the NE learners seem to have scored higher percentages in first few semesters, FE learners tend to have higher percentages in the last 7 semesters. This indicates that NE learners were more inclined to submit assignments in the earlier semesters, while FE learners in later stage of the study program.

The table below also explains the extent of disparity between FE and NE learners. Though, the variance of percentages between the group of learners ranges from -11.0% to 6.5%, the overall variance between the groups stands only at 1.4%. This is because in some semesters, NE learners scored higher percentage than FE. While in other semesters, the FE outperformed the NE group.

Thus, overall, there is no significant difference in the groups of learners. However, it important to note that the total score shows that FE learners (92.7%) were in fact slightly more persistent than NE learners (91.4%) in terms of assignment submission.

Table 2: Assignment Submission for Flexible Entry and Normal Entry

SEMESTER	% Submit (NE)	% Submit (FE)	Grand Total	% Variance
Jan10	91.1%	86.0%	90.0%	5.2%
May10	83.4%	93.3%	85.3%	-9.9%
Sep10	95.4%	88.9%	94.6%	6.5%
Jan11	89.7%	84.6%	88.8%	5.1%
May11	91.6%	88.9%	91.1%	2.7%
Sep11	90.7%	90.5%	90.6%	0.1%
Jan12	93.8%	93.8%	93.8%	0.0%
May12	93.9%	97.9%	94.5%	-4.0%
Sep12	95.6%	96.3%	95.7%	-0.7%
Jan13	94.4%	97.9%	95.0%	-3.5%
May13	89.4%	100.0%	91.5%	-10.6%
Sep13	91.4%	92.0%	91.5%	-0.6%
Jan14	86.7%	97.7%	89.1%	-11.0%
May14	92.6%	97.1%	93.8%	-4.5%
TOTAL	**91.4%**	**92.7%**	**91.6%**	**-1.4%**

(c)   Examination Sittings
OUM practices a trimester system comprising of 17, 17 and 18 weeks of semester in a year. There are four face to face tutorial classes in a semester and it is conducted every fortnightly. Final examinations are commonly held within 2 to 3 weeks duration beginning from week fifteenth to week seventeenth of the semester.

The next persistency indicator analysed was the determination among learners in taking examinations. The attempts taken to sit for examination reflect the readiness and confidence level among learners to be tested on the knowledge acquired throughout the semester. The rate of examination sittings were derived based on total number of examination sittings against total registration of courses. On the other hand, sitting rates reflect how many of those registered for the courses were determined enough to go through the assessment process.

Based on the figures listed in Table 3, both groups of learners were found to be highly persistent in sitting for examinations. The total sitting rate of 95.4% pointed out that only 4.6% of those registered for the courses did not sit for examination at the end of the semester. Additionally, the lowest sitting rate is at 88.0% and highest at 98.6%.

In total, it is found that there is no significant difference in the examination sitting rates among FE (95.7%) and NE (95.3%) learners. The examination sittings for FE learners range from 88.2% to 100% and 88.9% to 98.6% for NE learners. This means that both FE and NE learners were persistent in terms of sitting for examinations.

Additionally, the small variance of examination sittings showed in Table 3 below confirmed that there is no significant difference between FE and NE learners. It is also noted that FE learners scored higher sitting rates in the earlier semesters. While, NE learners scored higher in the later stage of the program.

Table 3: Examination Sittings

Semester	NE	FE	Total	Variance
	% Sit Exam	% Sit Exam	% Sit Exam	% Sit Exam
Jan10	94.7%	93.6%	94.5%	1.0%
May10	92.1%	97.9%	93.3%	-5.8%
Sep10	97.7%	99.0%	97.9%	-1.4%
Jan11	96.0%	97.7%	96.3%	-1.7%
May11	96.5%	100.0%	97.2%	-3.5%
Sep11	96.8%	97.3%	96.9%	-0.6%
Jan12	98.6%	95.4%	97.9%	3.2%
May12	98.4%	100.0%	98.6%	-1.6%
Sep12	97.6%	96.4%	97.4%	1.2%
Jan13	95.8%	97.9%	96.2%	-2.1%
May13	93.3%	90.4%	92.7%	2.9%
Sep13	91.0%	88.2%	90.5%	2.8%
Jan14	91.4%	90.7%	91.3%	0.7%
May14	88.9%	85.3%	88.0%	3.6%
TOTAL	**95.3%**	**95.7%**	**95.4%**	**-0.5%**

(d) Academic Performance

Table 4 illustrated learners' academic performance in each semester. The performances were tabulated according to the mode of entry and CGPA achievement of "< 2.0 " and " ≥2.0 ". It is noted that throughout 14 semester of studies, 34% of the attempts among FE learners achieved CGPA of above 2.0. While other attempts recorded achievement of < 2.0. On the other hand, 57% (864) attempts by NE learners recorded achievement of ≥2.0 and the remaining were < 2.0. Comparatively, higher percentages of NE learners obtained CGPA of ≥2.0 in the examination sittings.

Additionally, the researchers intended to have a closer look of the differences in academic performance for NE as well as FE learners. The statistics tabulated in Table 5 showed learners' academic performance according to year of study. However, it is also clear that every year, NE learners continually scored higher percentage of learners with CGPA of above 2.0. Oppositely, higher percentages of FE learners constantly obtained CGPA of less than 2.0 every year. On the whole, learners who came in through NE performed better academically than FE learners.

Table 4: Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) by Semester

Semester	Flexible Entry (FE)		Total FE	Normal Entry (NE)		Total NE
	<2.00	> 2.00		<2.00	> 2.00	
Jan10	31	22	53	73	131	204
May10	29	16	45	73	101	174
Sep10	22	15	37	71	86	157
Jan11	21	10	31	79	60	139
May11	19	10	29	63	58	121
Sep11	20	9	29	56	50	106
Jan12	16	7	23	22	85	107
May12	15	6	21	43	52	95
Sep12	14	7	21	39	53	92
Jan13	11	6	17	33	47	80
May13	10	6	16	31	43	74
Sep13	11	5	16	28	46	74
May14	10	2	12	24	19	43
Jan14	13	2	15	28	33	61
Grand Total	**242**	**123**	**365**	**663**	**864**	**1527**
	66%	**34%**		**43%**	**57%**	

Table 5: Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) by Year

Semester	Flexible Entry (FE)		Normal Entry (NE)	
	<2.00	> 2.00	<2.00	> 2.00
Year 1	**61%**	39%	41%	**59%**
Year 2	**67%**	33%	54%	**46%**
Year 3	**69%**	31%	35%	**65%**
Year 4	**65%**	35%	40%	**60%**
Year 5	**85%**	15%	50%	**50%**
Grand Total	**242**	**123**	**663**	**864**
	66%	**34%**	**43%**	**57%**

Discussion and Conclusion

The finding of this study concludes that generally FE learners were more persistent in throughout the 14 semester of studies. This is evident from the three dimensions measured in this study; Re-registration, Assignment Submission and Examination Sitting. Out of the three dimensions, the overall persistency rates for assignment submission and examination sittings for the FE were higher than the NE learners.

In terms of academic performance, it was found that NE learners performed better than FE learners where 57% of NE learners scored CGPA of ≥2.0 as compared to 34% by FE learners. Similarly, less percentage of NE learners scored CGPA of < 2.0. Overall trend of academic performance for both groups appear to be fluctuating over the years and sharply fall in the fifth year in terms of those getting CGPA of ≥2.0.

Based on the findings, there is a need for OUM to formulate effective intervention measures to help FE learners in their studies. Even though academic performances of FE learners are not as good as NE learners, these learners have more courage and commitment to their studies. Lacking of basic academic could have led to inferior performance in studies at OUM.

References

Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate learner attrition. Review of Educational Review, 55, 485-540.

Carr. S. (2000). As distance education comes of age, the challenge is keeping the students. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 46(23). A39-A41.

European Commission, A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, Unit E-3. (2011). Retrieve from http://www.irlgov.ie/educ/new/LifeLongLearninghtm.htm.

Latif, A. L & Fadzil, M. (2007). Retention initiatives at Open University Malaysia: Past, present and future. Paper presented at 21st Annual AAOU Conference, Putrajaya.

Latifah, Abdol Latif and Mansor, Fadzil and Kek , Lilian Siew Yick. (2009). Persistence and Performance: Does Prior Learning Really Matter? In: ICI9 – International Conference on Information, 12-13 August 2009, Kuala Lumpur.

Latif, A. L., Bahroom, R. & Sungsri, S. (2009). Managing retention in ODL Institutions: A case study on Open University Malaysia and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. Asean Journal of Open and Distance Learning. 1(1), 1 – 10.

Lee, Nagarajah and Chung, Han Tek and Rahmah Hashim, and Lim, Tick-Meng. (2011). *The relationship between persistence, academic engagement, and academic achievement among postgraduates students of OUM.* In: The International Lifelong Learning Conference (ICLLL) 2011, 14-15 November 2011, Seri Pacific Hotel, Kuala Lumpur.

Ng, Richard and Ahmad Izanee Awang, and Latifah Abdol Latif, and Ramli Bahroom. (2008). *An empirical study of the effect on learning skills workshop on learning readiness in an ODL environment.* In: 8th Annual SEAAIR Conference, 4-6 November 2008, Surabaya, Indonesia.

Ng, Richard and Santhi, Raghavan and Rosli Hamir. (2012). *Supporting New ODL Learners via Face-to-Face Academic Advising to Increase Retention: Sharing Open University Malaysia's Experience.* In: The 26th Annual Conference of Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU2012), 16-18 October 2012, Chiba, Japan.

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). Building learning communities in cyberspace. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Raghavan, S. (2011). Supporting Learners All The Way. OUM Today, Issue 81 April 2011. Open University Malaysia Publication: Kuala Lumpur.

Reisman, S. (2003). Electronic learning communities: Issues and best practices. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. Review of Education Research, 45, 89-125.

Tinto, V. (1993). Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition (2nd Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.