

Addressing Student Attrition in An Open Distance E-Learning Undergraduate Program: The Case of The University of The Philippines Open University Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies Program

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ABSTRACT

Student attrition is indicative of how the educational system of academic institutions fairs. Addressing student attrition is a greater challenge for academic institutions solely focused on delivering Open and Distance eLearning (ODeL) education. A plethora of studies have found that attrition rates in the ODeL set-ups are higher compared to the conventional face-to-face physical arrangement (Moore et al., 2017; Rotar, 2022; Shaw et al., 2016; Muljana et al., 2019). This high rate of online attrition is rooted in the clamor of non-traditional students for more online courses that have significantly changed the course of growth of online learning. To address this attrition issue, this study aims to describe and examine the student attrition in the University of the Philippines Open University Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies (BAMS) Program during the academic years covering 2018 to 2023. Based on available data, the primary reasons for student withdrawal in the BAMS Program is transferring to another university. This holds for all the academic years within the five-year coverage of this study. Other factors contributing to withdrawal include financial constraints, conflict in schedules, mental health issues, migration, exceeding residency limits, and adaptation challenges to non-traditional distance learning environments. Generally, the results of this study showed that there was a low attrition rate among the BAMS students. Thus, this study advances further study that would delve deeper into the reasons behind student withdrawals from the BAMS Program by using qualitative methods. Additionally, incorporating statistical analysis can reveal associations among variables, helping identify root causes of attrition. The study's limitation lies in its focus solely on students withdrawing from the program rather than those shifting within the university, which could offer further insights for program enhancement.

Keywords: student attrition in ODeL, quality assurance in education, undergraduate program/education management

INTRODUCTION

Drop-out rates in academic institutions serve as indicators of the effectiveness of their educational systems. Along with absenteeism, drop-out rates reflect the general issues and challenges faced by the institution (Graeff-Martin et al., 2006 as cited by Parreño, 2022). For higher education institutions (HEIs), their profitability heavily relies on student enrollment and retention until graduation. HEIs depend on tuition fees to function and provide services (Azarcon, 2014). Research has shown that it is more cost-effective for institutions to invest in retaining students rather than replacing them in the long run (Shaw et al., 2016).

In the context of the Philippines, where drop-out rates remain significant despite increased enrolment due to free college tuition, understanding the antecedents of student attrition becomes even more crucial (De Vera, 2023 as cited by Cruz, 2023). Demographic characteristics of students, high education costs, and financial resources have been identified as key factors contributing to attrition in the country (Reyes, 2018; Orong et al., 2020; Parreño, 2022).

Addressing student attrition is particularly challenging for online education institutions. Studies have consistently found higher attrition rates in online learning compared to traditional face-to-face settings (Moore et al., 2017; Rotar, 2022; Shaw et al., 2016; Muljana et al., 2019). The increased demand for online courses has led to a surge in non-traditional students seeking flexible learning options. However, this increase also poses a risk of higher attrition rates, which can impact resource planning and perceptions of online education quality (Moore et al., 2017).

Online education institutions need to revisit their academic structures and address areas of concern experienced by students and educators to effectively tackle student attrition. To address this attrition issue, this study aims to describe and examine the student attrition in the University of the Philippines Open University Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies (BAMS) Program during the academic years covering 2018-2019 to 2022-2023. Further, this review aims to provide insights that can inform strategies for reducing attrition rates and improving educational outcomes.

OBJECTIVES

In general, this paper explored the reasons behind the attrition of BAMS students from A.Y. 2018-2019 to A.Y. 2022-2023. Specifically, it aimed to:

1. Identify the number of students officially enrolled and admitted per trimester from A.Y. 2018-2019 to A.Y. 2022-2023;

2. Determine the trend of student attrition in the BAMS Program from A.Y. 2018-2019 to A.Y. 2022-2023; and
3. Examine the reasons behind student attrition from A.Y. 2018-2019 to A.Y. 2022-2023

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Drop-out rates are indicative of how the educational system of an academic institution fairs. It is one of the variables used along with absenteeism to gauge the effectiveness of an educational system by reflecting on general issues and challenges faced by the academic structure (Graeff-Martin et al., 2006 as cited by Parreño, 2022). For higher education institutions (HEIs), their profitability greatly relies on the number of student enrollees and attracting them to stay in the program until they graduate — owing to the fact that HEIs are immensely dependent on school tuition fees to function and deliver service (Azarcon, 2014). Moreover, several studies have also shown that it is more cost-effective for academic institutions to invest in retaining their students rather than replacing them in the long run (Shaw et al., 2016). For this reason, student attrition plays a significant factor not only in shaping the institutional image of the academic institution but also in sustaining its institutional costs. This thereby imposes the need for HEIs to determine the key drivers influencing a student's decision to either stay or leave the program and provide necessary interventions to address student dropouts (Azarcon et al., 2014).

Addressing student attrition is a greater challenge for academic institutions solely focused on delivering online education. A plethora of studies have found that attrition rates in the online learning set-ups are higher compared to the conventional face-to-face physical arrangement (Moore et al., 2017; Rotar, 2022; Shaw et al., 2016; Muljana et al., 2019). This high rate of online attrition is rooted in the clamor of non-traditional students for more online courses that have significantly changed the course of growth of online learning. The increase in demand, however, has consequently increased the risk of engendering high attrition rates, such that a fraction of potential dropouts could feasibly influence the resource planning and general perceptions of the online education quality of the academic institution (Moore et al., 2017). Accordingly, it is imperative for online education institutions to revisit their academic structure and study the areas of concern experienced by their students and educators to address student attrition.

Online Student Attrition

Moore (1973) as cited by Keegan (1980), defined distance education (DE) as a "family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors, including those that in a contiguous situation would be performed in the learner's presence, so that communication between the teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print,

electronic, mechanical or other devices". Kegan (1967) as cited by Garrison and Shale (1987) further characterized distance education through five (5) elements: the physical separation of learner and instructor; the presence of academic organization overseeing the planning and delivery of learning; the use of technologies as main instruments of teaching and learning; two-way communication between learners and instructors; and a perpetual absence of learning groups. Distance education draws learners, particularly adult learners (Meister, 2002; Moore & Kearsley, 2005 as cited by Reyes, 2018), due to their flexibility and convenience. Reyes (2018) noted that DE programs open opportunities for individuals with multiple commitments to pursue personal and professional growth without needing to physically attend classes.

Rotar (2022) agreed that online learning technologies through flexibility and accessibility have changed the landscape for higher education. According to Zimmerman (2012) and Lee and Choi (2011), as cited by Muljana et al. (2019), online learning enables students to have the flexibility that traditional learning set-ups do not have, particularly time and pacing. Given its self-paced nature of learning, it licenses individuals, specifically those with efficient time management and work discipline, to pursue education while simultaneously attending to other commitments. Henceforward, online students tend to have different demographic characteristics compared to those in traditional face-to-face arrangements. They are relatively older and have more obligations to perform (Moore et al., 2017). Having no restrictions in terms of time and location, along with the fact that it is relatively less costly compared to the fees of a traditional face-to-face setup, entices people to invest in online education. This is further proved by the high demand for online courses as clamored by the increasing number of non-traditional students (Moore et al. (2017).

Employers also see online learning as beneficial on their end through the reduction in training costs supposedly dedicated to employees. Additionally, it also reduces the potential accumulated leave of absence (LOAs) of their employees as they do not need to be physically present during their classes. Online learning is also beneficial for students who feel more comfortable engaging with others online compared to a face-to-face setting (Muljana et al., 2019). Boud and Lee (2009) and Boud and Tennant (2006), as cited by Shaw et al. (2016), further highlighted that the investment in online education translates to horizontal and vertical career improvement which have significant impacts on the overall advancement of a student's life.

However, the flexibility and convenience of online learning are not for everyone. Studies have shown that completion rates in online learning as well as graduate rates are relatively lower compared to the traditional set-up (Xu and Jaggars, 2011a, 2011b as cited by Muljana et al., 2019). Several factors from different capitals are attributed to student attrition.

Despite the numerous studies on attrition, a universally agreed-upon definition is still yet to be met. Parreño (2022) cited some of its definitions from the multiple studies he came across such as the student's incapability to complete the education as caused by a variety of factors; failure to show up in the class for a specific period; transferring to another academic institution; failure to be admitted in the program; and individuals who withdraw from the program before graduating or completing the requirements as prescribed in the curriculum (Dekkers and Classen, 2014; Selda, 2014; Suh, 2001; and Goksen, 2006).

There have been several theoretical models proposed to investigate student attrition as early as the 1970s (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975; Bean and Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1995; Rovai, 2003; and Falcone, 2011). Most of these models were rooted in the goal of exploring and explaining the plausible causating factors related to the rising rates of student withdrawal from the programs. In the higher education setting, student attrition continues to be a cause of concern. Countless studies have continually surface over the years, each with the goal of devising strategies to tackle the underlying causes and challenges associated with student attrition.

The changing landscape of education has prompted scholars to re-examine existing theoretical models and address established limitations that impede further clarity on the concept of student attrition. Correspondingly, scholars proposed enhanced theoretical models that accommodated identified limitations as far as examining student attrition from traditional learning settings to nontraditional learning settings.

Theoretical Models: Retention, Attrition, Progress

One of the most notable theoretical models that pioneered the studies on student attrition is Spady's (1970) Model of Undergraduate Dropout Process. According to Spady, social and academic factors are the fundamental determinants of student attrition. He argued that these factors significantly influence the capacity and capability of students to adjust within the academic institution. As such, failing to integrate accordingly in the environment prompts students to drop out of online education.

In line with Spady's argument, Tinto (1975) proposed the Model of Dropout Behavior which assumed that a learner's personal background and personal characteristics are significant determinants of their capability and behavioral adjustments within the academic environment and interactions among peers. In this model, Tinto identified two types of student withdrawal: voluntary and forced. However, observations on his model narrated that it neglected external factors faced by non-traditional students, which could have potentially influenced their dropout behaviors.

Bean and Metzner (1985) responded to this limitation by proposing a Model of Non-traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition. This model focused heavily on the influence of external factors (i.e. student background, academic characteristics, environmental factors, and academic and psychological outcomes) on student attrition and argued that these tend to hinder the adjustment of older students in the academic environment.

A study by Kember (1995), seemingly supports this claim by introducing a theoretical framework fundamentally based in Tinto's work, which argued that older students relatively bear more responsibilities (i.e. family-related and/or work-related commitments) than the rest of the regular students, and these heavily affect their learning progress; hence at risk of attrition. According to Kember, gender, previous work experience, learning experience, and family status are significant factors that impact student retention and attrition. However, one established limitation of the model is its failure to situate student progress in the non-traditional setting.

Several theoretical models were introduced following those of Kember (1995). In 2003, Rovai devised a model that focused entirely on student attrition, stating student characteristics and skills, and external and internal factors are the main determinants of attrition. Fallone's model (2011) also mentioned the importance of self-efficacy, capital dimensions (i.e., social, economic, cultural, etc.), and sense of place and belongingness within the academic environment as indicators of learner progress. As theoretical models improved over the years, more causation factors have been identified and examined related to attrition, some of which are still needing further exploration.

Factors related to attrition

Through a systematic review of literature, Rotar (2022) deduced four fundamental factors influencing online student attrition: student factors, course factors, social factors, and support factors.

Student factors are composed mainly of the learner's individual characteristics, academic background, relevant experiences, skills, and psychological attributes. Employment has been one of the factors seen to have driven student attrition (Moore et al., 2017). In the study conducted by Moore et al. (2017) in the Australian setting of online courses, about 40% of students dropped out of school due to changes in the work environment. These changes came with increased workloads, responsibilities, and travels that necessitated adjustments and eventually, compromise. Generally, since non-traditional students prioritize employment over learning commitments, they tend to fall short in meeting online study goals whenever they are faced with increased work demands and pressure. In effect, these cause delays in their education and often disrupt momentum and learning progress. In the long run, overextension of delays eventually

leads to withdrawal from the program before graduation. A study conducted by Reyes (2018) and Chen (2013) also mentioned that demographic characteristics of students (i.e. age, gender, civil status, employment, and location), and previous enrollments in other educational institutions are factors that influence student progress in the program. According to Reyes (2018), younger learners are better at completing their programs due to their capability to adapt easily to online modes of learning. She also emphasized sources of income and employment as determinants of the student's progress in completing the program. Alipio (2020) emphasizes that psychological attributes and behaviors have positive and negative associations with student progression. Help-seeking, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social support have positive associations with student progression. Students who encountered difficulties but sought help had higher chances of exhibiting better academic performance due to the additional support received. The opposite is the case for those who refused to seek help whilst struggling with difficulties experienced. Similarly, he added that academic overload and perceived stress have negative associations with student progression.

Course factors pertain to elements involved in course design such as course flexibility and course relevancy. In the study conducted by Moore et al. (2017), the inflexibility of course assessment policies has influenced students' withdrawal from online courses. The apparent neglect to accommodate special circumstances of online students, particularly those with multiple commitments besides education and subject to additional family and work pressures, faced difficulties in meeting course requirements on time. As a consequence of limited considerations in place, students are eventually forced to either temporarily pause or completely withdraw from the program. It is worth noting that most learners who choose the former tend to struggle to condition themselves back and adjust to the academic environment after a temporary pause, which then eventually leads to attrition. Most often, a temporary pause from pursuing the program only serves as an additional layer of support to delay student attrition. In line with course-related factors, the study conducted by Azarcon et al. (2014) mentioned the quality of education, the quality of instructors, and the increase in fees as some of the significant factors affecting student retention and attrition.

Social factors are related to the engagement between and among learners and instructors (i.e., online interactions, connectedness, and social presence). Falcone (2011), Boyle et al. (2010), and Rovai (2003) as cited by Rotar (2022) argued that a sense of place and belonging within the academic environment greatly influences learner progress. In support of this idea, several studies have found that limited learner-instructor interactions negatively affect learning progress due to isolation and disconnection (Phirangee and Malec 2017; Kuo and Belland, 2016; Cole et al., 2014 as cited by Rotar (2022)). Although interactions between learner-instructors are necessary for learner satisfaction and progress, such undertaking remains a significant challenge to practice

in the online education setting. With the concept of isolation and disconnection, studies have shown that students who lack a sense of belonging tend to experience poor student integration (Aversa & MacCall, 2013 as cited by Muljana et al., 2019). Gardner (2008), Andrews et al. (2020), and McPhillips (2023) found mental health as one of the factors that hampered student progression. In the study conducted by Gallup and Lumina Foundation as cited by McPhillips (2023), about 34% of undergraduate students had considered leaving their programs during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was mainly caused by emotional and mental distress more than financial concerns and coursework difficulties. In the United States, the number of young adults experiencing mental health difficulties has gotten even worse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support factors are primarily linked to institutional support and external factors (i.e. family and work support systems). Though most online students are attracted to online education due to its flexibility, some learners experience difficulties managing learning along with prior responsibilities (Park and Choi, 2009 as cited by Rotar, 2022). Recent studies have shown that these students need additional support from the institution through monitoring and proper directing to appropriate support channels for guidance and assistance. According to Shaw et al. (2016), the provision of additional academic support services to students at risk of attrition showed academic improvements. This is beneficial on both ends as from the perspective of academic institutions, the completion of a degree is indicative that it is meeting the objective of educating students. Concerning the inflexibility of course assessment policies, Moore et al. (2017) heavily stressed the importance of prioritizing a needs assessment targeted to students aimed to aptly address and accommodate plausible areas of concern. Similarly, Stone et al. (2017) as cited by Rotar (2022) proposed that support services for learners should be best incorporated into the course design to facilitate a better delivery of assistance whenever and wherever needed by the students.

Another most mentioned driver of student attrition is financial resources (Orong et al., 2020; Chen, 2013; Andrews et al., 2020; Parreño, 2022; Orion, 2014; and Reyes, 2018). Some students are faced with financial difficulties in terms of paying tuition fees, incurring debts to meet basic needs, and struggling to balance work and education (Andrews et al., 2020). According to the study conducted by Orion (2014), financial resources were a major concern of student attrition due to the unpredictability of financial resource availability. This is especially true for those who are financially dependent on the support given by their employers or parents. The high cost of education, particularly the high cost of tuition fees, has hampered students to complete their programs. Although there are public schools that offer free tuition fees, Reyes (2015) as cited by Parreño (2022) pointed out that being a student still entails costs other than tuition fees such as school supplies, transportation fares, uniforms, and daily meals. Consequently, some

students are left with no other option but to drop out of school in cases wherein they have to suddenly fill in the roles of being the main providers of their families (i.e. parents become unemployed or fall ill).

Studies have suggested that reconceptualizing attrition as a wicked problem would better tackle the problem and address it wholly (Beer and Lawson, 2016). The term wicked problem was first coined by Rittel and Webber in 1973, as those being immensely complicated, complex, multi-faceted, and almost unforeseeable (Head and Afford 2008 as cited by Beer and Lawson (2016). Student attrition, similar to existing wicked problems, is also non-linear and immensely complicated. Hence, interventions to address student attrition shall be policy and strategy-based. According to Tinto as cited by Beer and Lawson (2016), institutions are significant key players in addressing student attrition. In his study, he recommends institutions to set a baseline of high expectations for students; provide better academic and social student support; and overall improvement in quality of teaching and learning. Root problems of attrition unrelated to the institution such as family or personal responsibilities shall be addressed by additional support services (counseling services, child care support, and peer support) (Gardner, 2008). In line with the mental health issues faced by the students, institutions may offer psychological support to ease the mental and emotional distress experienced by students, particularly those at risk of failing. Remedial sessions and tutorial programs can also be launched to bridge the gaps and lessen the difficulties faced by students who are having academic difficulties (Oding, 2021). Students in distance learning are more at risk of attrition compared to traditional students in face-to-face learning (Angelino, Williams, and Natvig, 2007 as cited by Beer and Lawson, 2016). This implies that universities offering distance education are at greater risk of experiencing high attrition rates, which comes with consequences in terms of financial and reputational costs.

Online attrition in the Philippines

The Philippines Statistics Authority (PSA) defined dropouts as “students who depart from school due to any reason and fail to enroll in the succeeding school year.” Students who were also able to complete the previous year but are unable to proceed in the next school year are also considered dropouts. The implementation of free college tuition has resulted in a dramatic increase in student enrollment from 2.9 million in 2017 to 4.1 million in 2019. In the baccalaureate programs alone, a jump from 2.6 million to 3.8 million has been recorded in 2022. However, despite this significant increase in enrollment, graduation rates remain unchanged. Relatively, drop-out rates continue to remain significant at around 34% (De Vera, 2023 as cited by Cruz, 2023).

In the Philippines, the antecedents of student attrition are the demographic characteristics of students, the high cost of education, and financial resources (Reyes, 2018; Orong, 2020; Parreño, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to describe and examine the student attrition in the University of the Philippines Open University Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies (BAMS) Program. To achieve this objective, a quantitative research method was employed to answer the outlined objectives in the study.

Population

The target population for this study focused on all BAMS students enrolled during the AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023, encompassing the old and new batches of students in the program.

Data Collection Procedure

Data on student enrollments and registrations were collected from the UPOU Academic Information Management System (AIMS) Faculty of Study (FOS) Portal and UPOU STROL Portal. Approved applications for University Clearance, on the other hand, were gathered from the records of the Office of the Faculty Secretary. Other data that were not available in the system were requested from the Office of the University Registrar. These data were organized and analyzed through Google Sheets to derive the necessary information needed to determine and examine student attrition.

From the collected data on student enrollment and registrations, only those within the Academic Period 2018-2023 were included. This is in the purpose of illustrating a comparison across these academic years, considering the influence of external factors, such as the unprecedented occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the added considerations of the BAMS Program during this period.

With regards to the gathered applications for University Clearance, only approved requests for the purpose of obtaining an honorable dismissal to: 1) transfer to another university; 2) discontinue the degree program; and 3) withdrawal from the program were considered. This selection was made given that these requests were indicative of the students' intentions to completely stop and/or withdraw from the program.

Variables

“Registered students” refers to students who are eligible to register/enroll during the trimester. Only the following students are eligible to enroll at UPOU:

1. Newly admitted students: these are new and transfer students who had gone through the admission process and have been officially admitted to UPOU’s program (i.e. Undergraduate, Professional Teaching Certification (PTC), Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma, Masters, and/or Doctorate programs);
2. Continuing students: these encompass both part-time and full-time students presently enrolled at UPOU; as well as students who have come back from an authorized Leave of Absence (LOA), and those readmitted, referring to former UPOU students who have returned after being absent without leave (AWOL) with an approved application for readmission in the program;
3. Cross-Enrollee students: these are students from other UP units or non-UP units who have received approval to register for courses at UPOU by securing an approved permit to cross-enroll/register form; and
4. Non-Degree students: these are students who do not belong in any program of UPOU but had a duly approved application to enroll in UPOU prior to the start of the enrollment period.

These students are given access to the Online Registration System (ORS) – the platform used for enrollment at UPOU. Students can access the ORS via the Student Portal and proceed with the enrollment procedure. The ORS can only be accessed by eligible students from the first day to the last day of the enrollment period as prescribed in the Academic Calendar. In this study, only newly admitted and continuing students in the BAMS Program were included.

“Enrolled students” refer to students who have successfully completed the enrollment procedure within the prescribed enrollment period. This means that these students were able to select the courses they wish to enroll in; pay in full the registration fees; upload proof of payment on or before the last day of enrollment; and receive an official confirmation of enrollment.

“Total Unique Enrollment Per Academic Year” refers to the total number of students who were enrolled within the same Academic Year, be it for only one trimester, two trimesters, or three trimesters. This selection was made to have the aggregated total number of students who were enrolled in each academic year. This was used to calculate the percentage of complete withdrawals from the BAMS Program during the AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023.

“Total Number of Student Withdrawal from the BAMS Program” refers to the number of students who filed for University Clearance to obtain an honorable dismissal from the University. Based on the UPOU Academic Policies and Procedures Manual (2021), only the following students should file for University Clearance:

1. Graduating students
2. Students withdrawing from the program
3. Students who will transfer to another university
4. Students applying for honorable dismissal
5. Students who will discontinue their degree programs
6. Students who have reached the prescribed maximum residency rule (MRR)

In this study, all applicants above were considered except for graduating students. In accordance with Article 398 of the UP Code, an honorable dismissal refers to the voluntary withdrawal of the student from the University, granted with the approval of the University Registrar. Accordingly, a student who has been cleared from the university for the purpose of securing an Honorable Dismissal will no longer be eligible to re-enroll in their former program. In addition, all students described above, are required to obtain an honorable dismissal from the University.

“Reasons behind Withdrawal” refers to the indicated intentions of students behind their applications for honorable dismissal. Each application was reviewed to consolidate the reasons into categories. These reasons were considered factors in student attrition. Data gathered were tallied and aggregated into the following: 1) intent to transfer to another university; 2) financial constraints; 3) conflicts in schedule; 4) psychological issues (i.e. mental health); 5) migration abroad; 6) Lapsed/beyond the Maximum Residency Rule (MRR); and 7) not accustomed to distance learning.

“Tenure as a BAMS student” refers to the number of trimesters and/or academic years that the student has stayed in the program before officially and completely withdrawing and/or discontinuing from BAMS. Withdrawal from the program refers to the aforementioned case above which is through the application of the University Clearance with the purpose of securing an honorable dismissal.

Data Analysis:

Descriptive statistics was employed to analyze the collected quantitative data relevant to the study. In particular, the use of frequencies and percentages were utilized to demonstrate derived

data for better presentation of results. This was utilized in presenting the following: 1) enrolled students per academic year; 2) unenrolled students per academic year; 3) total student withdrawal per academic year; 4) reasons behind student withdrawal per academic year; and 5) student tenure in the BAMS Program per academic year.

Ethical considerations

Participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the entire research undertaking. To safeguard the privacy of the participants, unique identifiers such as student numbers were assigned to each individual student record instead of using any personal information during the data processing and analysis procedure. This practice was employed as a precautionary measure to adhere to the ethical standards and reinforce the commitment to protecting the identity of the participants. The assigned unique identifiers allowed the derivation and analysis of data without compromising the privacy of the individuals involved. This practice of participant confidentiality ensures that the study upholds the highest ethical standards and fosters a sense of trust and security among the contributors, ultimately contributing to the robustness and credibility of the research outcomes.

Limitations

In this study, attrition primarily refers to the complete withdrawal of students from the program through an approved application of University Clearance for the purpose of obtaining an honorable dismissal. Students on AWOL, LOA, or DRP were not considered. This selection was made given that these students are still eligible to return to the program and re-enroll in the next trimester, provided that they satisfy the readmission requirements particularly for students on AWOL. On the other hand, students who have filed for University Clearance for the purpose of an honorable dismissal are permanently ineligible to return to their program once their applications have been processed and approved.

The study's generalizability is limited due to its focus on a specific ODeL program in the University of the Philippines Open University. However, efforts can still contribute valuable insights within this context.

Results and Discussion

Student Enrollment and Registration

Student registration and student enrollment per trimester and per academic year were gathered to identify the number and percentage of enrolled and unenrolled students every trimester from the AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023. The unenrolled students were computed by deducting the total

number of officially enrolled students from the total number of eligible students to register for the specific trimester and academic year. A series of summary tables were presented as follows:

Table 1. Summary of Eligible Students to Register and Officially Enrolled Students for 1st Trimester AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023.

1st Trimester					
Academic Year	AY 2018-2019	AY 2019-2020	AY 2020-2021	AY 2021-2022	AY 2022-2023
Total No. of Eligible Students to Register	502	519	588	638	814
Total No. of Officially Enrolled Students	499	512	574	622	790
Total No. of Unenrolled Students	3	7	14	16	24
% Enrolled Students	99.40%	98.65%	97.62%	97.49%	97.05%
% Unenrolled Students	0.60%	1.35%	2.38%	2.51%	2.95%

Table 2. Summary of Eligible Students to Register and Officially Enrolled Students for 2nd Trimester AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023.

2nd Trimester					
Academic Year	AY 2018-2019	AY 2019-2020	AY 2020-2021	AY 2021-2022	AY 2022-2023
Total No. of Eligible Students to Register	472	466	550	602	783
Total No. of Officially Enrolled Students	471	463	545	584	770
Total No. of Unenrolled Students	1	3	5	18	13
% Enrolled Students	99.79%	99.36%	99.09%	97.01%	98.34%
% Unenrolled Students	0.21%	0.64%	0.91%	2.99%	1.66%

Table 3. Summary of Eligible Students to Register and Officially Enrolled Students for 3rd Trimester AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023

3rd Trimester					
Academic Year	AY 2018-2019	AY 2019-2020	AY 2020-2021	AY 2021-2022	AY 2022-2023
Total No. of Eligible Students to Register	490	442	500	568	748
Total No. of Officially Enrolled Students	487	428	479	550	725
Total No. of Unenrolled Students	3	14	21	18	23
% Enrolled Students	99.39%	96.83%	95.80%	96.83%	96.93%
% Unenrolled Students	0.61%	3.17%	4.20%	3.17%	3.07%

Based on the gathered data, the Total Unique Enrollment Per Academic Year was computed by matching student enrollment records of all trimesters per academic year. Duplicates of student records (i.e. students enrollment for more than one trimester) were removed to arrive with the needed derived data. A summary table of the Total Unique Enrollment Per Academic Year can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of Total Unique Enrollment Per Academic Year from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023

Academic Year	Total Unique Enrollment Per Academic Year
AY 2018-2019	591

AY 2019-2020	542
AY 2020-2021	608
AY 2021-2022	666
AY 2022-2023	847

Based on Table 1, 2, and 3, it can be seen that the total number of eligible students to register and officially enrolled are increasing every trimester. In the same way, Table 4 also shows an increasing total unique enrollment per academic year. This increase can be attributed to the increasing number of student admissions evident for the past years. In fact, records show that there has been a consistent increase of student intake per academic year in the BAMS Program, the highest being in AY 2022-2023 among the five (5) academic years covered in the study. In addition, the BAMS Program has also been accepting student intakes for 2nd and 3rd Trimesters, but solely to accommodate the graduates from the Associate in Arts (AA) Program who are interested to pursue BAMS right after graduation. This practice has been implemented to address the concerns of AA graduates in waiting for a year after graduation to get admitted in BAMS. This is in line with the admission policy of the program to only allow student intake every 1st trimester.

However, with the increase in the total number of eligible students to register and total number of officially enrolled students, it can also be seen that the total number of unenrolled students are increasing every trimester, except for all the 2nd trimesters of AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023. Table 1 and 2 reflect a significant drop of unenrolled students from 1st Trimesters to the 2nd trimesters of AY 2018-2019, AY 2019-2020, AY 2020-2021, and AY 2022-2023. However, an increase can be seen in 2nd Trimester AY 2021-2022.

The proportion of enrolled and unenrolled students per academic year were computed to show the trend of student enrollment and non-enrollment in the BAMS Program within the 5 year period, per trimester, from the AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023.

Figure 1. Unenrolled students during the 1st Trimester of AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023

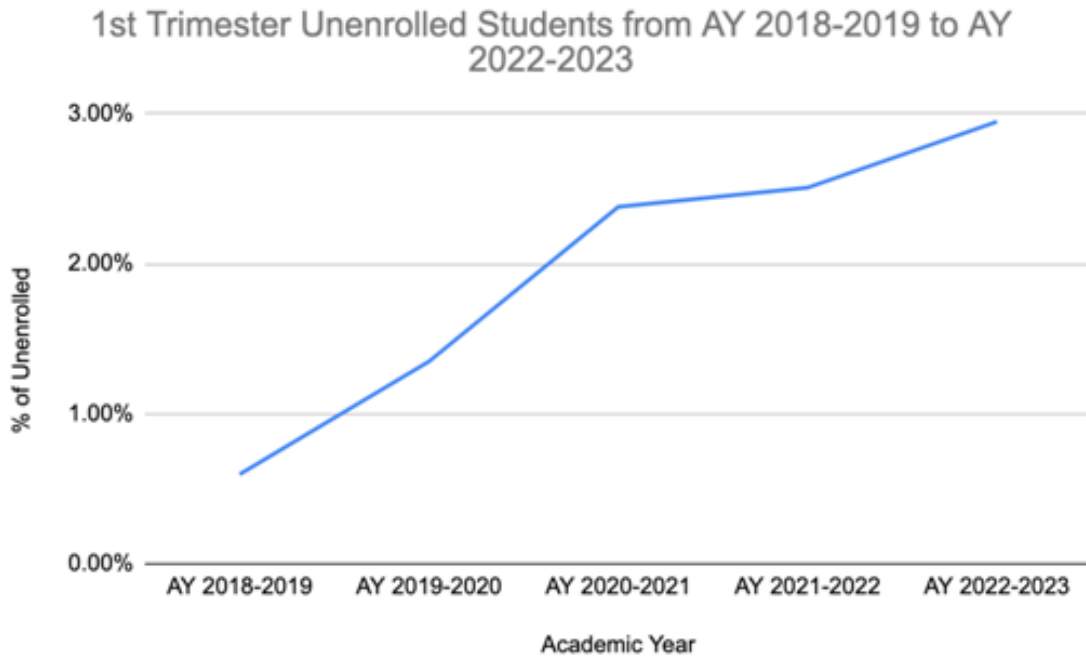


Figure 2. Unenrolled students during the 2nd Trimester of AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023

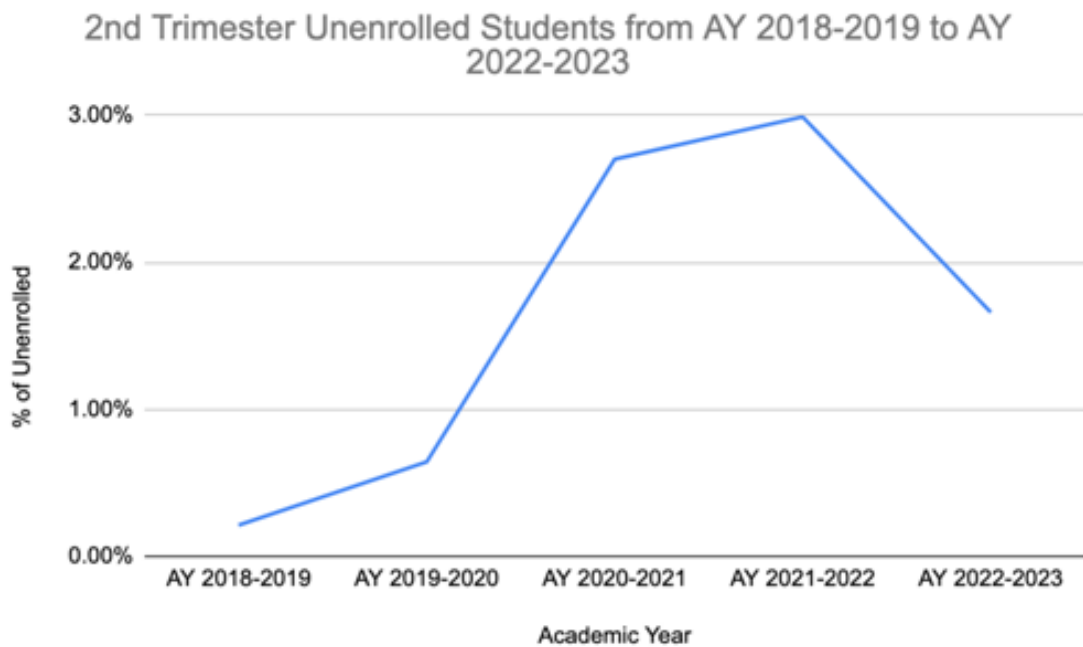
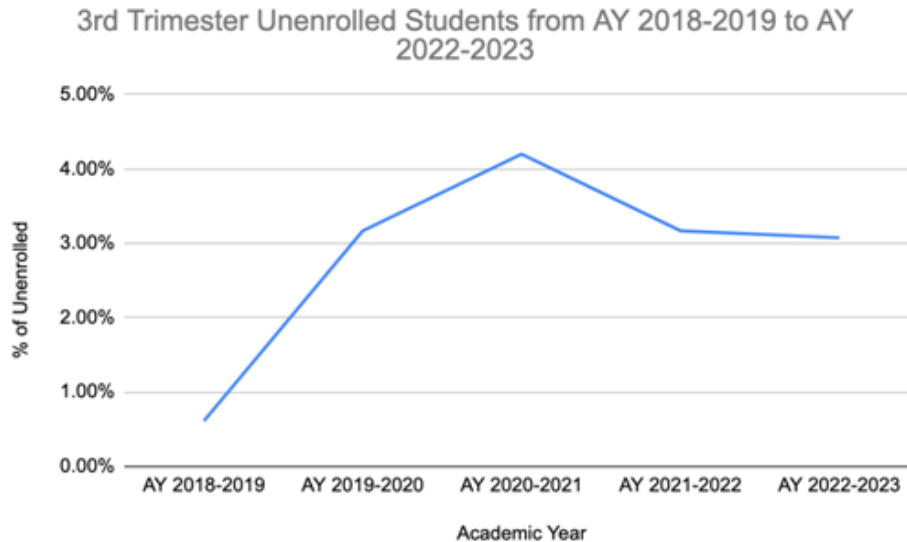


Figure 3. Unenrolled students during the 3rd Trimester of AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023



As seen in Figures 1, 2, and 3, the percentage of unenrolled students show an increasing trend during the 1st Trimesters of AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023. Based on the UPOU AIMS Portal, these students were eligible to register during the said period but either: 1) failed to proceed in the payment procedure; or 2) did not register for their courses. One circumstance to which this can be attributed to is the change of plans of newly admitted students to pursue BAMS. In particular, to shift in the open distance eLearning setup. Based on the review of records, there have been cases wherein newly admitted students tend to defer their admission and/or first enrollment in the program due to various reasons (i.e. change of course and university, financial concerns, etc.). A similar increasing trend can also be seen in the case of the 2nd and 3rd Trimesters of AY 2018-2019 to AY 2020-2021. In particular, Table 2 and Figure 2 shows that unenrolled students peaked during AY 2021-2022. On the other hand, a decreasing trend of unenrolled students can be seen for the 3rd Trimesters. Table 3 and Figure 3 show that although AY 2018-2019 to AY 2020-2021 had an increasing trend, a consistent downward trend of unenrolled students is evident from AY 2020-2021 to AY 2022-2023.

Student Attrition

Student attrition was determined using the Total Unique Enrollment Per Academic Year and the Total Number of Student Withdrawal from the BAMS Program.

The total student withdrawal data of the BAMS Program was gathered from the University Clearance application forms submitted by the students to the Office of the Faculty Secretary. A consolidated Google Sheet of the same records was also revisited for cross-checking. Collected

data was organized by removing other applications for University Clearance filed for other purposes aside from the aforementioned above (i.e. graduation requirements, transcript of records, etc.). Table 5 shows the summary of students with approved University Clearance applications for AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023.

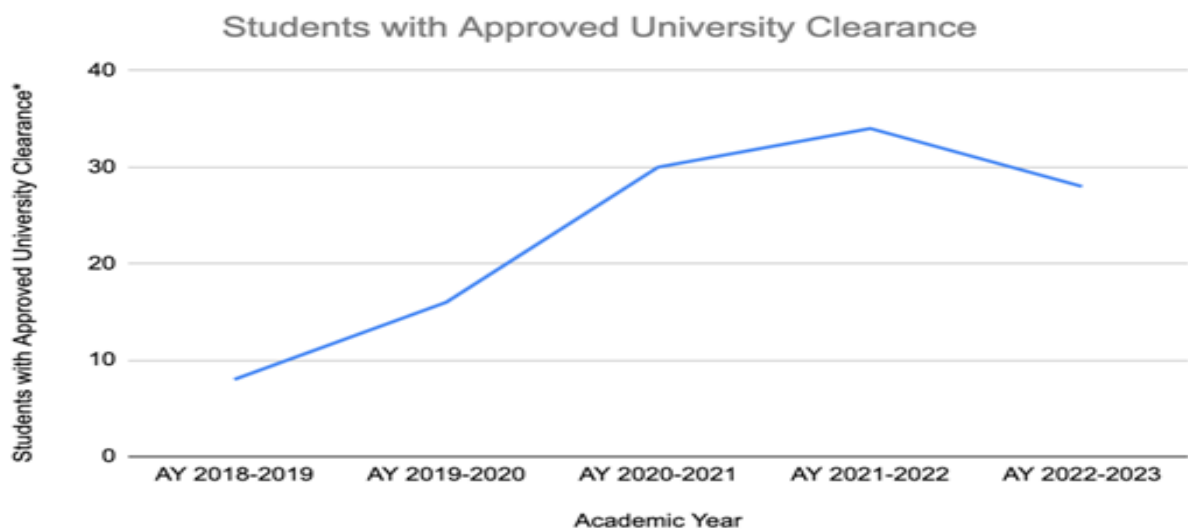
Table 5. Summary of Approved University Clearance for AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023

Academic Year	Students with Approved University Clearance*
AY 2018-2019	8
AY 2019-2020	16
AY 2020-2021	30
AY 2021-2022	34
AY 2022-2023	28

*Filed for the purpose of obtaining an honorable dismissal for: 1) transfer to another university; 2) discontinue the degree program; and 3) withdrawal from the program.

As seen in Table 5 and Figure 4, there has been a consistent increase in student withdrawal in the BAMS Program from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2021-2022, the highest being in AY 2021-2022 with about 34 approved University Clearance applications. However, a decrease can be seen in AY 2022-2023 with about 28 approved University Clearance applications.

Figure 4. Students with Approved University Clearance



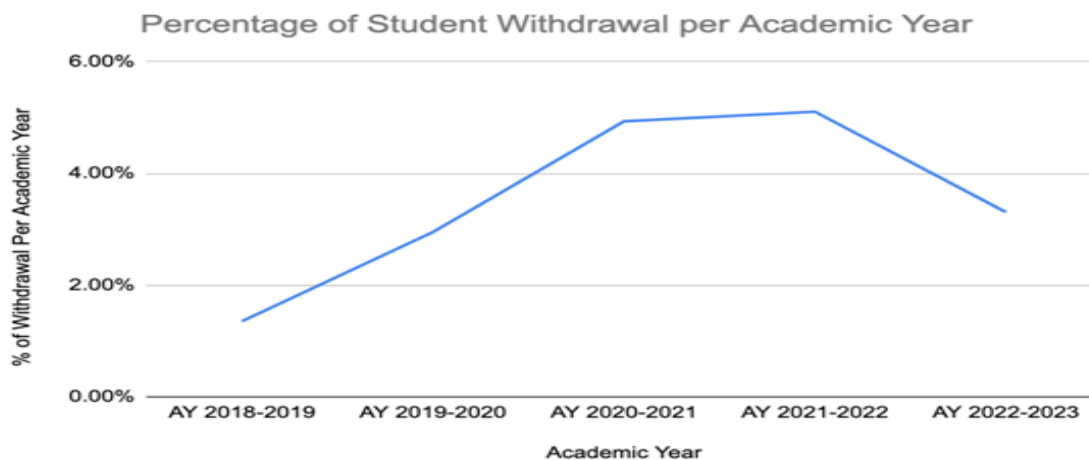
The proportion of student withdrawal per Academic Year was computed to show the trend within the 5 year period. This was computed by simply dividing the total number of students who withdrew from the program per academic year by the total unique enrollment per academic year multiplied by 100. Table 6 shows the summary of percentage student withdrawal per academic year for the 5 year period covered in the study.

Table 6. Summary of Total Number of Student Withdrawals from the BAMS Program from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023

Academic Year	AY 2018-2019	AY 2019-2020	AY 2020-2021	AY 2021-2022	AY 2022-2023
Total Unique Enrollment Per Academic Year	591	542	608	666	847
Total number of withdrawal in the Program	8	16	30	34	28
% of Withdrawal Per Academic Year	1.35%	2.95%	4.93%	5.11%	3.31%

Similarly, Figure 5 shows an increasing trend of student withdrawal from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2021-2022, while a decreasing trend towards AY 2022-2023. Based on the figure, the peak of student withdrawal was during AY 2021-2022 in the course of the 5 year covered period. One of the plausible causes to which this can be attributed to was the extended consideration given to students wishing to meet the transfer requirements for other UP constituent universities (CUs) during the extraordinary circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 5. Percentage of Student Withdrawal per Academic Year from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023



Based on the article available in the BAMS Freshdesk, students who were determined to attempt to transfer to another CU by the end of the 1st Trimester 2021 were allowed to overload during the 1st Trimester until 2nd Trimester 2021. This is provided that they request permission and satisfy the requirements implored by the then BAMS Program Chair. While students are given the freedom to transfer out of UPOU under the premise that they have met the transfer requirements for another program, the BAMS program generally accepts students on the premise that they intend to finish the program. Hence, overloading is generally not recommended nor approved, most especially for the sole purpose of expediting a student’s intention to transfer out of the program. However, this practice was not strictly upheld during AY 2021-2022 in line with the extended compassion and empathy to students brought about by the extraordinary circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The regular load for BAMS students every trimester is 12 units. Given this, it would take students at least one academic year (3 trimesters) to satisfy the required units by most programs, which is at least 34 units. The BAMS Program acknowledged that some students might wish to pursue another program of study at another UP CU as soon as they were able to, and extended consideration to its students by allowing them to overload in the 1st and 2nd Trimesters 2021. This intention of the students to transfer is reflected in the collected reasons behind the students’ applications for University Clearance for the purpose of obtaining an honorable dismissal from the University. As seen in Table 7, out of the 34 collected applications for University clearance, about 30 students obtained an honorable dismissal for the purpose of having the intention to transfer to another university.

Table 7. Summary of Reasons Behind Withdrawal from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023

Reasons for Honorable Dismissal	AY 2018-2019	AY 2019-2020	AY 2020-2021	AY 2021-2022	AY 2022-2023
1. Intent to transfer to another university	7	14	29	30	27
2. Financial constraints	0	2	0	0	0
3. Conflicts in schedule	0	0	1	0	0
4. Psychological issues (i.e. mental health)	0	0	0	2	0

5. Migration abroad	0	0	0	0	1
6. Lapsed/beyond the Maximum Residency Rule (MRR)	1	0	0	0	0
7. Not accustomed to distance learning	0	0	0	2	0
Total	8	16	30	34	28

Similarly, this is also somehow reflected in the tenure characteristics of the students from the collected data. The tenure was determined by their first enrollment (admission year and trimester) in the BAMS program and the approval date of their University Clearance applications. Organized data were presented per academic year from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023 in Table 8.

As seen in Table 8, most of the students had stayed in BAMS between 1-2 academic years (3-6 trimesters). This period was relatively enough for students to earn the desired units for transferring, provided that they also achieve the minimum average grade implored by the other universities of their interest.

Table 8. Summary of student tenure before withdrawal from the BAMS Program for AY 2018-2019

Academic Year	AY 2018-2019	AY 2019-2020	AY 2020-2021	AY 2021-2022	AY 2022-2023
Total No. of students with 1 trimester tenure	0	2	4	6	5
Total No. of students with 2 trimesters tenure	0	1	3	4	1
Total No. of students with 3 trimesters tenure (1 Academic Year)	2	4	10	6	2

Total No. of students with 4-6 trimesters tenure (2 Academic Years)	1	3	8	16	17
Total No. of students with more than 7 trimesters tenure (>3 Academic Years)	5	6	5	2	3

Aside from the intent to transfer to another university, other reasons mentioned behind the withdrawal from the program were financial constraints, conflicts in schedules, mental health issues, migration to a different country, extending beyond the MRR, and not being accustomed to open distance eLearning. Upon reviewing the records, most of these reasons were in fact mentioned by the students as the basis of their intent to transfer out and/or discontinue the program

Based on the approved applications for University Clearance, there were students, in particular newly admitted students, who found it difficult to adjust in the open distance eLearning. These students still prefer the face-to-face learning setup after experiencing the open distance eLearning for 1 to 2 trimesters in the program. Most of them further said that the extraordinary circumstances brought by the COVID-19 pandemic had become a driver in aggravating their difficulties in adapting to the non-traditional face-to-face setup of learning and teaching. This had imposed challenges to students in meeting their course requirements, which had triggered mental distress to some. There were even cases wherein students were advised by medical professionals to transition to the traditional face-to-face learning setup in consideration of their mental well-being. This finding is coherent to the study conducted by Gallup and Lumina Foundation as cited by McPhilipps (2023), wherein they found out that undergraduate students had considered leaving their programs during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic primarily caused by emotional and mental distress.

Conflicts in schedules were mainly a concern experienced by employed students. Although open distance eLearning banks on self-paced learning, some students are relatively unfit and unaccustomed to this practice. As mentioned by Moore et al. (2017), employed students in the non-traditional face-to-face learning tend to prioritize employment over learning commitments. Most of the time, they encounter difficulties achieving their online study goals when faced with

work demands and pressure as the latter would be the priority to be addressed. This causes delays in their education and disrupts their momentum and learning progress.

CONCLUSION

The BAMS program has a steady increase in student registrations in the 1st trimester of every academic year spanning from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2022-2023. A notable surge of almost 50% can be seen, with the number of enrolled students increasing from 499 during the 1st Trimester of AY 2018-2019 to about 814 in the 1st Trimester of AY 2022-2023. This increase is attributed to the growing number of student admissions over the past five years, reaching its peak in AY 2022-2023 within the studied period. However, student enrollments tend to decrease during the 2nd and 3rd trimesters as depicted in the tables and charts above. Similarly, an increasing trend of unenrolled students can be seen per trimester, which is evident in all trimesters, except for the 2nd and 3rd trimesters of AY 2022-2023.

Based on the findings of the study, student attrition shows a downward trend for AY 2022-2023. This breaks the continuous increasing trend from AY 2018-2019 to AY 2021-2022 from 5% down to 3%. Among the reviewed causes indicated in the University Clearance applications, transferring to another university served as the primary reason for student withdrawal in the BAMS Program. This is evident for the entire 5-year academic period covered in the study, which further peaked in AY 2021-2022. The extended compassion and empathy by the BAMS program to its students during the extraordinary circumstances brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular on its internal overloading policy, may have played a role in this scenario. Easing this policy has enabled the process for students to fulfill the minimum required units in a shorter time frame.

Other mentioned causes of student withdrawal as indicated in the University Clearance applications were found to be related to the student's intention to transfer to another university. These causes were financial constraints, conflicts in schedules, mental health issues, migration abroad, extending beyond the MRR, and not being accustomed to the non-traditional learning and teaching environment—open distance eLearning. These have influenced and triggered students to eventually discontinue their journey in the BAMS Program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Beer and Lawson (2016) recognized attrition as a wicked problem—complex and complicated; thus, it must be tackled systematically using a flexible and collaborative approach. This can be addressed by having an in-depth understanding of its nature, scope, and context.

Consequently, this study suggests that future researchers interested in thoroughly exploring and comprehending attrition in the BAMS Program should delve deeper into the reasons behind students withdrawing from the program. Specifically, researchers should thoroughly examine University Clearance applications, particularly those with the aim of elucidating the circumstances leading to the student's intent of discontinuing the program. This entails a comprehensive review of relevant documents, such as applications for dropping (DRP) and Leave of Absence (LOA), particularly on the provided reasons for initiating these requests. Such scrutiny aims to provide additional insights and a more profound context regarding the student's journey in the BAMS program. This may shed light on their evolving personal and career growth, as well as offer insights into the program's effectiveness—both in terms of the manner of instruction and the students' reception of it. This may help the program determine the areas of improvement to look into and eventually prioritize to address. In accordance with this, reviewing applications for readmission requests may also be considered. In particular, the section wherein students are required to provide an explanation for being absent without leave (AWOL).

Future researchers can also incorporate a statistical analysis that may give additional context and explanation on the variables used in the study. In particular, their potential associations that may elucidate a cause and effect relationship between and among the said variables. Given that attrition is recognized as a wicked problem, its causes can potentially be interrelated and correlated to one another, thus, shall be addressed in a manner that not only once facet is being dealt with. This would enable researchers to determine the root of the problem. Obtaining raw data for all variables to be used throughout the covered period implored in the study would greatly facilitate a more in-depth exploration of plausible explanations derived from these variables.

One of the limitations in this study is its scope in terms of attrition which is defined by the approved applications for University Clearance with the purpose of completely withdrawing from the program. The University Clearance covers students who intend to transfer out of the university, but not students who intend to shift to a different program within UPOU. Examining this aspect would aid in identifying potential shortcomings of the program, assessing its performance against other university programs, and suggesting avenues for further its improvement.

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