

Characteristics of Dropout Indonesia's Online Students at Universitas Terbuka

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Abstract

This study investigated some characteristics of dropped out online learning students within the first year. It used interview data from 16 participants from three dissimilar locations: Jakarta (metropolitan), Palembang (urban), and Ambon (rural). Purposive sampling was used in this study. It was expected that they would be a reliable source of authentic information. To ensure research ethics, the names of the institution and interviewees were kept confidential and anonymous. Prior to data collection, the research questions were refined into some guiding questions. The interviewers used appropriate probing techniques to encourage participants to provide additional information. The interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. The results showed that some characteristics indicates the causes of students dropped out in their online learning, including balancing multiple roles, living in remote or rural areas, financial difficulties, lack motivation, having difficulties in self-learning, insufficient learning support, gender in balancing multiple roles, and having geographic barriers. The findings revealed various characteristics of dropout students as well as the reasons why they dropped out in online learning. As a result, Universitas Terbuka must take comprehensive approaches to address the issues, allowing students to complete their studies on time.

Keywords: Characteristics, Dropout Students, Online Learning, Qualitative, Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

This article presents research exploring the characteristics of students who struggle at the beginning of their studies at Universitas Terbuka (UT), or Indonesia Open University. The study focuses on the high number of students who fail early in the semester, aiming to understand why some new distance learners leave the program during their first year.

It's important to note that the term "dropout" may not fully apply here, as UT does not impose a maximum time limit for program completion, allowing students to continue their studies at any time. A more accurate term might be "study suspension," as students can pause and later resume their education (Bristol, n.d.). UT offers flexible pathways to meet the diverse needs of its students (Atchoarena, 2021) and maintains a database of student records from registration to facilitate this process.

Despite these supports, many students still suspend their studies early on. This concern drives UT to identify the characteristics of students who struggle academically, aiming to uncover patterns that indicate potential failure. By understanding these characteristics, UT hopes to reduce and even prevent student failures at the start of their learning journey.

There is a lot of literature that focuses on students dropping out of school in distance learning environments along (Olaya et al., 2020) with studies related to the causes and factors behind students dropping out of school. In recent years, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning, a form of learning used in distance and campus-based universities, has attracted the attention of researchers. Covid-19 has pushed most campus-based universities to switch to distance learning (Ezra et al., 2021). Their current research agrees that online learning has its own teaching methods that are different from traditional teaching methods. Failure to meet the requirements of online teaching methods can lead to student dropout and learning loss (Cerelia et al., 2021). It has been recognized that the dropout rate is an indicator of the success of online programs (Willging & Johnson, 2009).

Previous research has shown that student attrition or dropout rates in distance learning environments are high (Olaya et al., 2020; Markle, 2015; Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022). According to the results, administrators, field experts, instructors, and support staff are not aware of all the dropout reasons. The results of this research are believed to guide researchers, practitioners, and administrators in enhancing the quality of open and distance education (Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022).

The study by Del Bonifro et al (2020) aimed to predict the dropout of first-year undergraduate students using machine learning techniques. The researchers conducted experiments on real data from eleven schools of a major university. The study focused on three design principles: early prediction of dropout, using only personal information and academic records from high school, and the number of credits acquired during the first months of the first year.

Another study found that a model that builds on Spady and Tinto's classic models that explains dropout intentions in higher education and specific study programs. The model, which emphasized individual background characteristics and students' satisfaction with institutional support, was tested in Luxembourg. Initial study commitment was not associated with social integration, but satisfaction with institutional support was a significant factor in dropout intention (Hadjar et al., 2023).

The research only focused on models of students' failure without referring to a specific period. Furthermore, the first semester of study is a vulnerable period for students in their learning, so the right step for universities to take is to identify student characteristics to avoid learning failure.

Literature Review

Characteristics can be interpreted as nouns and adjectives (*Characteristic Definition & Meaning / Britannica Dictionary*, n.d.). The term "characteristics" can refer to either nouns or adjectives. When used as an adjective, "characteristic" describes distinctive traits or qualities of a person, thing, or group. As a noun, "characteristic" refers to a special quality or distinctive feature that sets a person, thing, or group apart from others (*Characteristic Definition & Meaning / Britannica Dictionary*, n.d.). In the context of this paper, "characteristics" will be used and interpreted as nouns rather than adjectives.

The characteristics of the dropout students can be defined based on some experts' model. According to Tinto (1975) based his own theory on a previous model by Spady (1970) that he had reviewed. Tinto's (1975) distinct feature is the focus on sociological aspects of dropout, emphasized both (socioeconomic) individual factors and factors relating to the higher education (HE) institutions. Individual aspect are socioeconomic background, parental level of education, and average grade at completion of secondary school. While institutional conditions, such as the study environment, modalities of particular study programs, size, expenditure, institutional selectivity, or teaching quality, shape further drivers of dropout.

While Rovai (2003) divided dropout students into two parts: student characteristics and skills prior to admission and external and internal factors that affect students after admission. The characteristics of dropout students are the first part, namely characteristics before admission. Rovai (2003) examines students' personal characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender, intellectual development, and academic performance as well as preparation before college. This is different from Hadjar et al (Hadjar et al., 2023), who has similar personal characteristics such as social origin, gender, immigrant background.

The characteristics of dropout students will be analyzed using Rovai's model, which categorizes factors into pre-admission and post-admission. This clear division makes it easier to differentiate between student characteristics and institutional experiences. The pre-admission category includes demographic traits like age, ethnicity, and gender, allowing for a straightforward analysis of individual differences.

In contrast, Tinto and Hadjar offer more complex frameworks. Rovai's simple pre/post admission split, along with its focus on demographics and various external/internal factors, can effectively categorize and analyze dropout data. However, Tinto and Hadjar provide deeper conceptual insights and connections to higher education.

Methodology

The study aims to answer the following question: what are the characteristics of the dropout students in their first year of study? The sampling method used was purposive sampling (Dawadi, 2021). Several procedures were used to determine the sample and its size. First, dropout students were identified from various programs. Next, the sample locations were categorized into three types: metropolitan, suburban, and rural. Then, 10 students were

selected from each category. Finally, participants were invited to join the study via email and mobile phone.

The selected participants were from three geographical areas: Jakarta (metropolitan), Palembang (urban), and Ambon (rural). These participants were expected to provide valuable insights and comparisons regarding the challenges that led to dropout. It's important to note that internet access in Indonesia is unevenly distributed across the country, and the challenges and characteristics of students likely vary among metropolitan, urban, and rural areas.

Data for this study was collected from three UT Regional Offices: Jakarta (2 males and 2 females), Palembang (3 males and 2 females), and Ambon (5 males and 2 females). Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used to gather information. According to Creswell in Bridges (2023), focus group interviews are effective for obtaining feedback from specific individuals through group discussions with a small number of participants. A total of 16 participants joined the FGD.

The results were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis (Wæraas, 2022). This method interprets data by first classifying it, then grouping codes into themes, and arranging them during a second round of coding. A third round of coding helps identify aggregate dimensions and visualize the codes and themes.

Before the interviews, it was made clear that participation was optional and that participants could withdraw at any time. Among the participants, three were older than 29 years, while 13 were younger. All participants were employed, with three being married.

Results

The current study aimed to explore the characteristics of dropout students in a distance learning program using Rovai's model, which looks at student characteristics before admission and the external and internal factors that affect them afterward. Rovai (2003) focuses on pre-admission characteristics, analyzing factors such as age, ethnicity, gender, intellectual development, academic performance, and college preparation. The findings showed that external factors—like financial issues, family responsibilities, work engagement, transportation, and internet access—significantly contributed to dropout rates. Internal factors included dissatisfaction with the program. Notably, some participants experienced both external and internal challenges simultaneously. The key characteristics of students who dropped out of the distance learning program are summarized below.

Characteristics of External Factor

Challenges Balancing Multiple Roles

Several issues were identified. Students highlighted the challenges that working adults face in balancing professional, family, and academic responsibilities, which can lead to dropping out of courses. Notably, one participant mentioned that he would permanently withdraw. Research indicates that the first year is a critical period for students in distance learning and online environments (Willging & Johnson, 2009).

One female participant emphasized the difficulty of managing work, family duties, and studying after work hours. She expressed that she is often too exhausted from her job to focus on her studies.

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

The female student emphasizes the exhaustion after a day's work that makes it difficult to focus on studies in the evening, on top of family duties like childcare. Her comment illustrates the burden of managing competing demands on her time and energy from work, family, and education. Moreover, a male student also said as below.

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

A male student explained that increased responsibilities at work led him to pause his studies for a semester, as he could not adequately focus on his coursework. His experience illustrates how changes in work demands can force working learners to temporarily or permanently deprioritize their education.

Students indicate that juggling multiple roles and shifting responsibilities heightens dropout risks for working adult learners. Institutions can support these students by offering flexible scheduling, online courses, and understanding their unique needs. Services like childcare could also help ease the burden for working parents.

Work-study conflict is a significant challenge for distance learning students. According to (Rovai, 2003), working students are more likely to drop out of online courses if they cannot resolve this conflict. However, many distance learning institutions provide flexible learning models, allowing students to resume their studies at any time. Those who decide to withdraw still have the opportunity to continue later. Markle (2015) noted that work-study conflict is often more pronounced among female students, while Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, (2022) found that both male and female students experience this issue.

Residence in Remote/Rural Areas With Limited Access to Transportation and Internet Connectivity

Students in remote areas of Indonesia, especially in the eastern regions, encounter significant barriers to online education due to limited internet infrastructure. A study found that students often cannot participate in online learning activities like webinars and tutorials because of poor connectivity. Shaikh & Asif (2022) noted that inadequate internet access can hinder students' learning progress. One student shared his frustration about lacking any internet access, which severely disrupts his education and ability to complete assignments.

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

Aside from internet access, some students struggle with transportation requirements to take exams or attend in-person tutorials. Some people are unable to participate because of the long

distances they must travel. One student explained how limited transportation posed an additional barrier, on top of poor internet access.

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

These issues exacerbate the educational disparity between rural Indonesian students and their urban peers. Those in remote areas already face financial constraints and technological divides. Having to overcome internet and transportation barriers just to finish their education adds another layer of difficulty.

Overall, rural eastern Indonesians are on the wrong side of the digital divide. Closing these systemic gaps will necessitate significant infrastructure upgrades and equitable distribution of educational resources. Significant improvements are required to ensure that all Indonesian students have access to online learning opportunities and academic support, regardless of location.

Students Facing Financial Difficulties or Loss of Scholarships

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often cite financial difficulties as a reason for dropping out. Losing scholarships due to poor academic performance is a key issue. One male student shared that failing his exams led to his scholarship being revoked. Without that funding, he couldn't pay his tuition and had to withdraw from his program. As he stated below.

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

Moreover, even those who had worked hard to save for tuition had to divert their funds due to financial emergencies. The following is a statement of one female student described how an unexpected emergency expense forced her to reallocate money she had saved for school fees.

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

Scholarship losses and unexpected financial needs depleted the students' limited educational resources. Without a financial safety net, any disruption would result in a loss of ability to pay fees and expenses.

These experiences show how challenging higher education can be for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Even small financial or performance issues can abruptly end their academic careers. This highlights the need for strong scholarships, hardship assistance, and flexible payment plans for economically vulnerable students. Financial stability and support systems are crucial to help dedicated individuals stay focused on their goals.

Personal and Familial Issues Like Parental Disapproval of Distance Learning, Family Problems, and Lack of Motivation

Some students dropped out of school due to personal or family issues student (Bağrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022), (Aydin et al., 2019). One significant factor was parental opposition to distance education. One male student stated that his parents preferred that he attend a traditional campus rather than continuing his education via distance learning. His parents refused to let him continue in the online program based on feedback from extended family members.

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

The male participant's parents preferred him attending a traditional campus instead of distance learning, leading him to pause studies. Family issues that caused emotional distress and frustration hampered students' academic progress. One female learner described how frustrations at home interfered with her ability to focus on exams, ultimately leading to failure.

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

The female participant faced family issues that impacted her studies and led to exam failure. These experiences highlight how personal motivations, family influences, and life circumstances affect student persistence. College counselors could better support students by addressing motivational challenges. Engaging with parents can help them understand the benefits of distance learning. With comprehensive support, more students could overcome obstacles and graduate.

Students Receiving Insufficient Learning Support

Insufficient support in distance learning programs contributed to dropout rates. Some students noted that the lack of tutor feedback on assignments was demotivating. One female participant explained that not receiving responses to her assignments and questions left her uncertain about her progress. Since she was focused on learning rather than grades, tutor feedback was essential for her improvement. Without it, she felt disconnected and unsure of how to advance.

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

Others noted that inflexible schedules for activities like webinars were a barrier. The female participant felt demotivated and uncertain about her progress without tutor feedback, and the lack of responses to her questions disheartened her. Fixed schedules were challenging due to her work and home duties, limiting her participation.

These experiences emphasize the need for effective instructor guidance and flexible learning support in online programs. Proactive outreach from tutors could help students feel more supported and confident in their progress. Accommodating schedules would allow working learners to access essential resources. Improved support systems can boost students' motivation to persevere through challenges.

Insufficient learning facilities, including interaction, lack of support from staff, and learning services, were factors that led to students dropping out (Willging & Johnson, 2009), (Budiman, 2015), (Dawadi, 2021). There would therefore seem to be a definite need for understanding the students in order to provide sufficient and appropriate supporting learning systems.

Facing Geographic Barriers

The experiences of students from metropolitan, urban, and rural areas highlight how geographic barriers interact with other issues such as the lack of local examination centers presented a challenge for those living on remote islands or in rural villages. As one male student on a remote Indonesian island explained, he had no testing site available, necessitating lengthy travel.

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

Students from various geographic regions faced distinct location-based challenges that impacted their education. Those living on remote islands or in far-flung rural villages faced difficulties in accessing essential academic activities. One male learner on a remote Indonesian island described how there were no examination centers nearby. To meet testing requirements, he was forced to travel extensively.

Remote students were unable to access standard academic support systems because no nearby facilities were available. Their participation was hampered by physical distance and lack of access to educational facilities. Moreover, another comment was from female student as below.

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

The female overseas student struggled with transportation issues due to cultural reasons, which affected her attendance. Students from abroad faced additional cultural limitations that made transportation harder. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the female learner explained that relying on rideshares from non-family males was uncommon, restricting her access to distant tutorial sites. Geographic barriers also hindered rural students, leading to travel challenges, fewer exam centers, and limited academic support.

In short, dropout students often lead complex lives, juggling multiple responsibilities. Working adults find it hard to balance studies with professional and family duties, often feeling exhausted after long days. Rural learners face limited access to resources, such as internet and transportation, putting them at a disadvantage. Financial hardship is also a significant barrier, as those from disadvantaged backgrounds have little cushion when scholarships fail or urgent needs arise.

Characteristics of Internal Factor

The Adjustment of Freshman and First-Term Students to Self-Directed Online Learning

Some students in their first semester or year face a critical risk of dropping out as they adapt to self-directed online learning. The transition to online education is particularly challenging, as many students are still learning to be organized and self-directed. One male student shared that he intended to register for the second semester but missed the deadline because he hadn't yet developed the skills to manage important dates independently.

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

This suggests that the student was still learning how to independently keep up with important deadlines in the first semester. Missing registration shows his struggle adapting.

Moreover, another key challenge in the first semester is adapting learning strategies to the online environment. A student who worked at sea explained how in his first semester, he lacked the preparation needed to access online learning without consistent internet. Not having figured out alternatives caused him to fall behind.

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

This comment indicates that the student was unprepared in the first semester for how to engage in online learning without consistent internet access. He had not yet figured out how to overcome this barrier.

These examples demonstrate how the initial adaptation phase leads to common pitfalls like missing deadlines or lacking engagement strategies. Students have not yet built skills to structure their time, meet deadlines proactively, and find solutions to participation barriers. The first semester is a make-or-break period of adjustment. At last, both comments demonstrate students in their first semester were still acclimating to managing online learning independently, leading to issues like missing deadlines and inability to participate consistently. This highlights the initial challenges of self-directed learning. It is important to bear in mind that distance and online learning students might not have sufficient experience to study independently, lack of technology literacy, and lack of preparation (Willging & Johnson, 2009; Aydin et al., 2019; Izham et al., 2022; Utami et al., 2020).

Male and Female Students' Balancing of Multiple Roles

Both male and female students encounter barriers in their studies, but female students often struggle more with balancing multiple roles, resulting in higher dropout rates. Female students pursuing online education while managing other responsibilities face intense challenges. One working mother explained that after a long day at work, she had little energy left for her studies while also caring for her children. The demands of work, motherhood, and education stretched her capacity thin.

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

Research shows that married women face nearly unsustainable obligations as they juggle roles as employees, mothers, and students. This "triple burden" leads to higher burnout and dropout rates among female learners, as they manage work, family care, and academic advancement simultaneously.

In contrast, male students generally take on fewer family care responsibilities alongside their jobs and studies. The unique demands of motherhood increase the burden for women, creating significant time and energy deficits that can derail their education.

Many dropouts share common behavioral and psychological traits, including lower motivation and resilience. Freshmen, in particular, often struggle with time management and miss deadlines during their adjustment period. Women frequently internalize societal pressures and underestimate their ability to balance competing demands. Overall, students tend to lack effective self-directed learning techniques, which is especially problematic in an online environment with insufficient support.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that students who dropped out faced a complex mix of external challenges and internal traits that tested their perseverance. Externally, these learners juggled busy schedules while balancing work, family duties, and education. Remote students dealt with geographic and technical barriers that left them feeling disconnected, and financial constraints added further pressure for those with limited resources.

Internally, many dropouts shared common traits, such as a lack of resilience and self-motivation to overcome online learning challenges. Freshmen often struggled with time management, missing deadlines during their adjustment period. For women, societal gender pressures intensified the strain of their many responsibilities.

This research highlights several characteristics of dropout students, as below:

1. **Balancing Multiple Roles:** Juggling work, family, and studies can lead to time management issues and reduced engagement, especially for female students. This highlights the need for flexible learning opportunities and support systems that consider non-academic workloads.
2. **Limited Access to Technology:** Students without reliable internet or adequate devices are disadvantaged in online learning. Providing alternative materials, offline content options, and loaner equipment programs can help bridge this access gap.
3. **Financial Difficulties:** The costs of online learning, such as tuition and technology, can be significant barriers. Scholarships, financial aid, and affordable tech solutions can enhance accessibility and reduce dropout rates.
4. **Lack of Motivation:** Success in online environments often depends on intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning. Engaging students through interactive activities, personalized feedback, and peer interaction can help overcome these motivational challenges.
5. **Insufficient Learning Support:** A lack of timely feedback, personalized help, and effective communication with instructors can leave students feeling lost. Strong support systems, including online tutoring and regular interactions with instructors, are vital for success.

6. **Geographic Barriers:** Students in remote areas often face poor internet access and limited technical support, hindering their participation in online learning. Addressing the digital divide and enhancing technical resources is crucial for equity.
7. **Difficulties in Self-Learning:** Some students struggle with independent learning, missing the guidance of traditional classrooms. Clear instructions, accessible materials, and opportunities for interaction with instructors and peers can help.
8. **Gender and Balancing Roles:** Female students may face added challenges due to societal expectations regarding domestic responsibilities, making it harder to balance multiple roles. Addressing gender inequalities and promoting family-friendly policies can create a more equitable learning environment.

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