

**Examining the Challenges of Open and Distance Learning: Insights from
the Centre for Open and Distance Learning,
University of Jaffna**

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a powerful technique for increasing the provision of higher education and encouraging lifelong learning. In this study, the researcher evaluates the challenges facing the learners of the Centre for Open and Distance Learning (CODL) in the University of Jaffna. A mixed-methodology approach is used in this research, where both quantitative and qualitative methods have been applied. Primary data has been collected using a structured questionnaire from CODL students via a convenience sampling method. Data has been analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22 and Microsoft Excel 2016, and reliability has been assessed using Cronbach's Alpha test. It has been found in this study that there are many individual, institutional, and emotional challenges that negatively affect the progress of the learners. Some major challenges include a lack of time to study, financial problems, conflicting work, family, and study pressures, a delay in the institutional process, and a lack of motivation in learning. Moreover, it is also found that family duties and isolation play a key role in increasing the emotional burden of the students and the chance of dropout. The research brings out the need for improved support mechanisms for learners, as well as increased flexibility in approach within the CODL, University of Jaffna. Increased provision of academic advice, effective administration, motivational support, and learner-oriented service can help increase retention rates and program completion among learners. This research helps gain a greater insight into the experiences of learners in distance learning contexts.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Student Retention, Learner Support Services, Institutional Support, Student Motivation

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged on the global scene as an innovative approach aimed at improving access to educational opportunities in regions that seek equitable educational opportunities. The flexible, accessible, and cost-effective features associated with ODL have enabled individuals to pursue their academic goals in conjunction with other life demands. The CODL, located at Jaffna University in Sri Lanka, is an example of an educational institution that provides significant educational opportunities using ODL methodologies.

Although ODL is associated with numerous advantages, it is also associated with certain complexities. A major concern that affects all ODL institutions worldwide is

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the high dropout rate among students, coupled with increased periods of completion (Yorke, 2004). Such concerns often point to underlying issues that affect ODL students. Some of the underlying issues that affect ODL students in Sri Lanka include limited learner support services.

Nonetheless, despite these significant advantages, the ODL system also poses unique challenges to the institutions and the system as a whole. The institutions often experience high student attrition and extended student program completions, which far exceed those in traditional university settings. These results indicate underlying challenges that distance learning students face in their learning process. One of the challenges in distance learning, especially in regions such as Sri Lanka, is the lack of support for the learners. These shortcomings lead to several challenges in the learning process. The attrition of students is defined as a longitudinal process in which there is dynamic interaction between individuals and structures, in which the experiences of individuals in the ODL system affect student retention. The purpose of this research is to identify and analyze the challenges faced by students undertaking the CODL at the University of Jaffna.

Aims and Objectives

Aim

The overarching purpose of this research is to discern and analyze the challenges confronting students enrolled in ODL programs at the CODL, University of Jaffna.

Objectives

1. To identify the individual-level challenges experienced by CODL students.
2. To explore the emotional difficulties encountered by CODL students during their studies.
3. To investigate the institutional shortcomings affecting CODL students' learning journey.
4. To propose strategies for CODL, University of Jaffna, to mitigate these identified challenges and enhance learner support.

Research Problem

The CODL, University of Jaffna, though being instrumental in providing open access to education, is also witnessing students dropping out or taking more time than what is actually required to complete their academic programs. This is an indicator of certain underlying issues that affect students' academic progress. Students often have

to deal with certain issues that affect them on an individual level, on an emotional level, and on an institutional level. This is evident in students having to deal with academic pressures in conjunction with their personal and professional lives. The impact that is being created is that students are either taking more time or dropping out of academics altogether. This is where there is a need for an in-depth study of the specific issues that affect students in order to make the ODL system more effective.

Literature Review

The Evolution and Growth of Open Distance Learning (ODL)

Open Distance Learning has witnessed tremendous growth and diversification worldwide, especially in the Asian education system. Open Distance Learning is essential in offering significant solutions in the expansion of access to higher education, overcoming geographical and socioeconomic obstacles. The shift in teaching methods from traditional teaching to technology-based learning is a major evolution in teaching pedagogy. This is further impacted by the evolution of technology and strategic planning in the shift to teaching in Open and Distance Learning institutions (Nhoni, 2025). The modern Open and Distance Learning environment utilizes technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Mobile Learning, and Open Educational Resources to improve learning (Deniz & Alici, 2024).

Institutional Support and Infrastructure in ODL Environments

Effective institutional support is a key factor in learner success and retention in an ODL mode (Majaule, 2023). Studies have emphasized the significance of strong support services for students, which include academic, psychosocial, and administrative support. For instance, ODL learners experience various infrastructural challenges, such as irregular access to technological facilities, erratic internet connectivity, and a lack of learning support centers, especially in distant areas (Kombe & Mtonga, 2021). Moreover, learners experience a delay in receiving feedback on assignments, issues in disseminating learning materials, and limited communication channels, which cause learner discontent. These operational challenges can directly affect learners' learning experience, leading to higher dropout rates (Yorke, 2004).

Individual and Emotional Barriers to ODL Success

ODL students often face various personal and emotional challenges. The first is time constraints, financial issues, and inadequate support from family and work. These issues make it difficult for students to concentrate on their studies (Mariki, 2025). The nature of distance learning is demanding, and students often face conflicts

in terms of balancing family and work responsibilities. This affects students' motivation to study and leads to dropout behavior. Emotional factors, like students' motivation to study and feelings of loneliness, also contribute to dropout behavior (Yorke, 2004). Self-regulation is an essential factor in predicting students' success in distance learning.

Socioeconomic, Technological, and Cultural Factors Impacting ODL Learners

Other than individual and institutional aspects, there are other significant aspects that affect the ODL learner experience. Socioeconomic, technological, and cultural aspects have been known to affect the ODL learner experience. The “digital divide” is still an issue in that there is a significant divide in access to and knowledge of ICTs. This is more so among ODL students from remote or disadvantaged backgrounds. Gender, ethnic background, and geographic location have been known to affect differences in academic performance (Gemmell & Harrison, 2020). For example, students in urban areas may have a different perception of e-learning than students in rural areas. Cultural background and educational background have been known to affect how students cope with independent ODL learning.

Methodology

The research design that was used in this study was the mixed research design that combined the qualitative and quantitative approaches. The most important tool that was used in the data collection process was the structured questionnaire.

The research used convenience sampling as the means of selecting the participants from the students studying at the CODL of the University of Jaffna. Convenience sampling seemed appropriate since the number of students at the university was vast and belonged to varied programmes. It was ensured that there were students of different ages, occupations, and study courses among the respondents to have varied opinions on ODL challenges. Questionnaire administered directly to CODL learners and focused on capturing issues relating to academic, personal, psychological, economic, and organizational problems encountered within the ODL system. Demographic variables included age, gender, marital status, occupation, and years of learning.

The Questionnaire closed-ended questions designed with the help of Likert-scale statements for measuring perceptions and experiences about problems associated with ODL by the students. A few open-ended questions were also included in order to enable respondents to provide detailed feedback on their opinions and experiences. The questionnaire was directly administered to CODL students through various

modes, including physical and online methods. The choice of using questionnaire surveys was made due to the efficiency of collecting standardized data from numerous respondents quickly.

Coding, arranging, and analyzing the gathered data were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22 and Microsoft Excel 2016. Descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation, were employed for analyzing and interpreting the data. While frequencies and percentages were utilized to examine the demographic attributes of the survey participants, including their ages, gender, marital status, and employment status, the mean and standard deviation tests were used for measuring the level and type of problems that students encounter within the ODL system.

As a means of testing the reliability of the research instrument and ensuring its internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha method was performed. According to George and Mallery (2003), Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.70 is considered acceptable, while values above 0.80 indicate good reliability. Meanwhile, the qualitative information gathered from the respondents' answers to the open-ended questions was subjected to thematic analysis by grouping related themes and patterns related to learner problems.

Results and Discussion

An analysis of the challenges experienced by learners in ODL settings, such as the CODL at the University of Jaffna, depicts a general pattern of individual, institutional, and emotional challenges. Though this paper focuses on the challenges experienced by learners in CODL University of Jaffna from a conceptual perspective, some of the challenges experienced by learners in an ODL setting in Sri Lanka, which is similar to the setting in which this paper is written, are used to illustrate some of the challenges experienced by learners in such settings.

Key Challenges Experienced by CODL Learners at the University of Jaffna

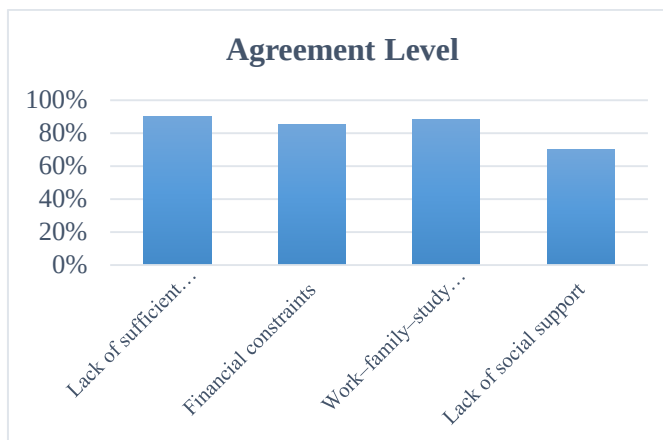
Learners in Open and Distance Learning settings, such as the CODL, University of Jaffna, experience a wide range of challenges that affect their academic development in a multifaceted way. From an empirical perspective, challenges experienced by learners in an ODL setting, such as the one in which this paper is written, can be summarized as individual, institutional, and emotional challenges.

Individual-Level Challenges

The main individual-level challenges identified by CODL learners are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Major Individual-Level Challenges Faced by Learners



(Source: Author's survey, 2026)

Major Individual-Level Challenges Faced by Learners include, but are not limited to, the continued experience of inadequate time for study, which is often compounded by other demands of life. Financial issues also form a significant challenge for learners, which can affect their access to resources and technologies, as well as their ability to pay fees on time. Moreover, learners often experience inadequate support from their families, employers, or social networks, which can affect their ability to effectively engage with their learning process. Family, work, and study schedule demands are some of the significant challenges that learners often experience. The demographic characteristics of the learners are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Learners in a CODL Context

Demographic Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Age Group	20–30 years	47.0
Age Group	30–40 years	32.0
Employment Status	Employed	69.27
Employment Status	Unemployed	30.73
Employment Sector	Self-employed	31.6
Employment Sector	Private Sector	36.9
Employment Sector	Semi-Government Sector	24.0
Employment Sector	Public Sector	7.5
Marital Status	Married	53.7

(Source: Author's survey, 2026)

For instance, demographic information from a CODL revealed that the majority of learners (47%) were in the 20- to 30-year age category, with 32% of learners in the 30- to 40-year category. This category of learners often represents learners with significant work demands as well as family demands. Employment status information revealed that 69.27% of learners were employed, whereas 30.73% of learners were not employed. Of those learners who were employed, 31.6% were self-employed, 24% were employed in the semi-government sector, 36.9% were employed in the private sector, and 7.5% were employed in the public sector. Furthermore, the statistics show that 53.7% of the learners were married, which indicates the simultaneous responsibilities that the learners were expected to fulfill. This gives us an insight into the challenges that the individual CODL learners at the University of Jaffna could be facing.

Institutional-Level Challenges

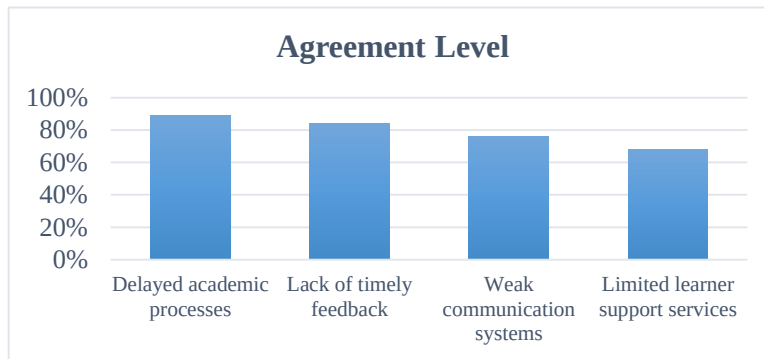
From the institutional perspective, learners in the CODL centers have indicated that the “delayed/ineffective study periods” are one of the most important factors that act as a barrier. This may include long academic timelines, delays in the provision of study materials, and the effective dissemination of information on assignments and examinations. The lack of feedback on the completion of assignments and the absence of proactive communication from the university regarding the academic and administrative process may also discourage the learners and make it difficult for them to keep up with the academic process.

Table 2

Institutional Challenges Experienced by ODL Learners

Institutional Challenge	Impact on Learners
Delayed study materials	Reduced preparation time
Delayed assignment feedback	Lower learner motivation
Weak communication systems	Confusion regarding deadlines
Long academic procedures	Increased learner dissatisfaction
Limited counseling support	Reduced academic guidance

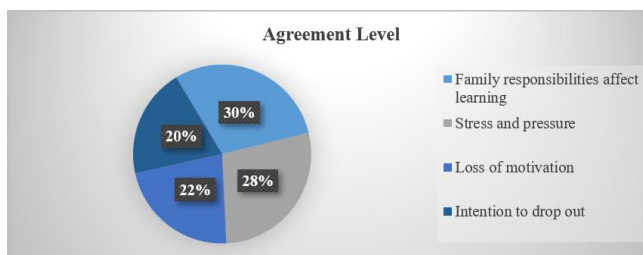
(Source: Author’s survey, 2026)

Figure 2*Institutional Factors Affecting Learner Satisfaction*

(Source: Author's survey, 2026)

Emotional and Psychological Challenges

Emotional and psychological factors are also significant in the case of CODL learners. Family demands can be a source of pressure, which can affect the learner's ability to concentrate on their studies. Loss of motivation to study is also an issue, which can be an emotional challenge for learners, leading to an intention to withdraw from the program. It is a challenging task to sustain the level of interest in an independent environment such as distance learning (Leow & Razak, 2024). Emotional factors are significant, but individual circumstances, external pressures, etc., also contribute to creating a complex picture of challenges for learners. The emotional challenges that influence learner retention are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3*Emotional Challenges Influencing Learner Retention*

(Source: Author's survey, 2026)

Impact of Work-Family-Study Balance on CODL Learner Retention

The delicate balance between work, family, and study is an important factor that affects CODL learner retention. Most students in distance learning situations are adults with prior obligations, and their inability to effectively cope with these demands is one of the main causes of dropout (Brosnan et al., 2023). When there is a conflict in study time with other obligations, students suffer from stress, which affects their study time. This often results in students dropping out. However, it is not just about balancing time but also about the psychological pressures that accompany constantly balancing demands. Research shows that flexible study time is effective in relieving some of the pressures, but institutional support is essential (Ucar & Ugurhan, 2023).

Table 4

Impact of Work-Family-Study Balance on Learners

Factor	Outcome
Long working hours	Reduced study time
Family commitments	Interrupted learning schedules
Financial pressure	Increased stress
Poor time management	Missed assignments
Lack of institutional flexibility	Higher dropout risk

(Source: Author's survey, 2026)

Consequences of Limited Support Services and Suggested Interventions

The challenges facing ODL learners are also due to limited support services. Academic counseling, interactive learning sessions, and feedback mechanisms are some of the areas in which support services are limited, affecting learners' satisfaction and progress (Mohamed et al., 2026). Learners also feel that they need to be communicated with in a more proactive manner. For example, in another context similar to ODL, research indicated that learners need to be sent SMS reminders for assignments and sometimes messages to boost their morale from the university.

Some of the possible interventions to improve learners' success and retention in the CODL University of Jaffna. First, Communication Systems can be strengthened by implementing automated communication systems to send notifications regarding assignments, updates in the study material, and exam notifications. Further, proactive motivational support can be provided by regularly sending emails or messages to learners to provide motivational support. Furthermore, Improving Feedback

Mechanisms by ensuring learners receive timely, positive, and personalized feedback regarding their assignments. In addition, Flexible Learner Support Units enhance the availability and accessibility of academic and psychosocial counseling support to learners. Finally, resource provision should be improved by addressing challenges related to the availability of study materials and access to digital resources, particularly for learners residing in remote areas. Suggested Interventions for Improving Learner Retention are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Suggested Interventions for Improving Learner Retention

Suggested Intervention	Expected Outcome
Automated communication systems	Improved learner awareness
SMS/email reminders	Better assignment submission rates
Timely personalized feedback	Increased learner motivation
Academic and psychosocial counseling	Better emotional support
Improved digital resource access	Enhanced learning opportunities

(Source: Author's survey, 2026)

Comparative Insights: CODL University of Jaffna and Broader ODL Contexts

The issues that were recognized for learners at CODL University of Jaffna are similar to what is generally recognized in other ODL situations around the world. Some of the issues that were recognized include time management issues, financial constraints, and the need for strong institutional support (Upadhayaya et al., 2021). However, there is also evidence that regional factors, which include aspects such as internet infrastructure, cultural influences on family obligations, and economic disparities, have been known to influence the degree or manner in which issues affect individuals. Though the issues have been recognized in similar ways in other ODL situations around the world, there is also evidence that the solutions have been unique in each case, depending on the unique circumstances of their operations.

An analysis of learner experiences in Open and Distance Learning, with particular reference to the CODL, University of Jaffna, indicates that there is an underlying set of challenges that impact academic persistence. These challenges, which hinder academic success, have been categorized into individual, institutional, and emotional aspects, which are all interrelated.

The findings, which have been consistent with other Open and Distance Learning institutions, indicate that students often have to deal with issues that emanate

from balancing domestic and work demands with academic requirements. Moreover, delays in administrative and teaching feedback also impact students' dissatisfaction with academic programs.

To increase the effectiveness of ODL at CODL University of Jaffna and assist students in fulfilling their educational goals, it is imperative that extensive institutional strategies be put in place. These strategies should go beyond supporting students in terms of administrative and academic support and include strategies that address students at an individual and emotional level. By supporting students in this manner, CODL University of Jaffna would be able to create an environment that is conducive for students. This would ultimately result in increased student completion and educational achievement for students at CODL University of Jaffna.

Table 6

The common challenges faced by distance learners

Challenge Category	Specific Challenge	Agreement Level (Indicative)
Individual (Learner)	Lack of sufficient time for study	High
Individual (Learner)	Financial constraints	High
Individual (Learner)	Lack of support from family, employer, and friends	Moderate-High
Individual (Learner)	Conflicts between family/work and study schedule	High
Institutional	Delayed/ineffective study period at the institution	High
Emotional	Family responsibilities affect learning	High
Emotional	No motivation to study	Moderate
Emotional	Feel like dropping out	Moderate

Note. The author's compilation is based on primary survey data

The above table, which represents the findings of a study conducted in an environment similar to an ODL institution, identifies some of the common challenges faced by distance learners, which are highly pertinent to the context of CODL University of Jaffna. The individual challenges of having inadequate study time, financial issues, and work-family balance issues have all shown high levels of agreement from the learners. The institutional challenges of having slow academic processes are also of concern. The individual learner's emotional challenges of having to balance their family responsibilities, issues of motivation, and potential for dropping out of the program are also issues of concern.

Conclusion

This study, which has been conducted to identify the problems faced by learners enrolled in CODL University of Jaffna, is indicative of the fact that apart from intellectual skills, there are several other issues affecting the success of a learner. Problems such as the conflict between career and domestic life, financial constraints, and lack of support systems are some of the important challenges that need to be overcome by the learners. The above-mentioned data provides reliable evidence regarding the above-mentioned issues faced by the CODL learners. By overcoming these barriers, CODL would be able to increase the success rates and completion rates of its learners. This could be done by adopting a comprehensive approach where, apart from increasing the academic assistance provided to learners, emotional and other requirements of the learners are also taken into account.

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