

# **The perception of students about the Cost of studying by Open and Distance Learning: *Case of the University of Goroka***

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## **Abstract**

The paper will present an aspect of a research done in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The study focused on the “Cost of studying by distance mode – Students Perspective”. The main attention is culture as a pivotal aspect to everyday decision making in Melanesia. The study ascertained that social elements in Melanesia are driving the way of life in general. It therefore defines how people behave and respond to certain issues.

In Melanesia scarcity of financial resources does not necessarily mean the absence of money. What it means is when priorities collide; family and cultural obligation take the upper hand leaving not enough to pursue Open and Distance Learning (ODL) study. In PNG the social pressures and cultural connections and values continue to influence pathways and decisions among cultural and tribal members. Therefore, for an ODL student to make the choice to pay for his or her fees means he or she has to sacrifice his or her social obligation, which is unpopular. It does not even help when financial resources are not made available to ODL students in terms of scholarship and tertiary loan scheme. Thus, the bulk of the population who wish to study by the ODL mode continue to miss out expanding the gap between the high and low class in the income earning graph. ODL providers again are not helping since the delivery mode is being seen as an entity to generate the ever declining government annual subsidy. The data for the research was collected from semi-structured questions among the University of Goroka (UOG) distance learning students.

## **Introduction**

In the last 100 years of Open and Distance Learning, providers have been battling attrition issue which resulted in many studies being carried out with the aim to find solutions. This investigation is one of the studies, whereby it tried to explore into the issue and determine if finance, family, social and cultural obligations are factors of attrition in PNG.

There is a common argument that studying through distance mode is cheap. But does this general discernment agree with students' perception of the cost of studying through distance mode, considering the demands for financial aid from their social responsibilities? This study has investigated the cost implication ODL has on students and believe that the results may help distance providers, especially in PNG, in the designing of their learner support (LS) model that would benefit both providers and the students.

The investigation tried to dig deep into the socio-cultural factors, socio-economic and general lifestyle of individual students in a third world country like PNG; a Melanesian country known to comprise most of the cultures in Melanesia and possibly the world. It is a study that tried to find out influences of decision making by ODL students among culturally influenced society.

## **Research questions**

The following question helps to investigate into the issue. How the unit fee affects the attrition and retention rates of distance students?

## **Aim of the research**

The study was designed to investigate the factors associated with the issue of attrition in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The study tried to ascertain and explore if there is a correlation between family, culture and finance that may have a high probability to have influenced the decisions of the Institute of Distance and Flexible Learning (IDFL) students, at the University Of Goroka and contributed to the high rate of attrition.

Whilst the study determines to seek out the view behind the issue, it is relevant and necessary that Melanesian culture is understood in its real context. Thus, the study went on to investigating the general culture of the Melanesian society from various literatures. Hence, it was also designed to fully understand the cultural context, way of life and how Melanesian people communicate and interact in their societies.

## Literature

The literature discussions have ascertained significant relationship between culture, family and finance as direct and indirect factors in the issue of attrition and retention in the ODL mode. There are also scholars such as May (1999) and Usun (2004) who are adamant and argued that these factors have tentacles attached to every individual lives and indirectly implying that the factors are somewhat remote controlling their way of life. Thus, for an institution to be successful in its ODL delivery and its aim to reduce attrition and improve retention rates, scholars like Simpson (2008) are very supportive of a learner support that takes care of the views of students as they are the main consumers of ODL products. Without them, institutions will not be able to make the money they anticipated to generate. Allen (1993) therefore believes that designing of support system in ODL should be contextualized and conceptualized. The findings from Nyondo (1998) on the financial issues faced by Department of Distance Learning, at the PNG University of Technology, parents gave some insights of the general reality faced in PNG ODL system, where he cited factors such as compensation, bride price and death of tribal members as items that rely on family finances and are real barriers to progress in ODL studies for their children. The argument is supported by Meek and Jones (1995) where they described affordability of tuition fees as one of the factors contributing to attrition and failure rates in PNG ODL.

In developed countries like the United State and Great Britain family expense is also pushing students below the level where they could cope, May (1998). In the Sub-Saharan Africa ODL institutions find it hard to increase unit cost but work harder to increase students' enrolment because of the troubling economic situation affecting their students, Mwenje and Kasowe (2013)

## Research Method

In the pursuit to answer the research question, the study used constructivism method design. It administered a semi-structured question among 9 distance students at the UOG. The sample comprised 3 female and they were all taken from the 2010 cohort. Enrolment data from 2010 to 2013 were also used as a quantitative data to provide the information of the trend of enrolment from the actual number of students. The qualitative data were analysed using the Colaizzi's data analysis technique, Speziale and Carpenter (2007) where the audio records were transcribed.

The analysis involved the extraction of data from the interview sessions. The amount of raw data collected was quite large, hence coding procedures were used to classify and compress the large volume of information.

The reduction and analysis process of the data were done manually where the recorded interviews were transcribed and amended into a written document. The Colaizzi's data analysis technique was used, Speziale and Carpenter (2007), where each interview text was transcribed and recorded in turn, noting repeated and singular comments. Responses were continuously appraised until a clear idea related to the topic had appeared and the value of the data was gradually developed.

**Table 1: Profile of interviewees in Papua New Guinea**

Interviewee (I)	Gender	Number of children	Number of children at School	Salary range per fortnight		Employment status of spouse
I1	Male	2	1	K200.00	K399.00	Unemployed
I2	Female	3	3	K400.00	K599.00	Divorced
I3	Male	6	4	K700.00	K899.00	Unemployed
I4	Male	5	3	K400.00	K599.00	Unemployed
I5	Female	3	1	K200.00	K399.00	Employed
I6	Female	3	3	K400.00	K599.00	Deceased
I7	Male	6	3	K400.00	K599.00	Unemployed
I8	Male	2	2	K400.00	K599.00	Unemployed
I9	Male	4	2	K200.00	K399.00	Unemployed

The repetitive themes were counted and quantified for the sake of building significant patterns and how often each theme appears

in the whole interviews that were carried out. The quantified data then translated into percentages as a ratio of all the responses. Each theme in the same category was also compared in percentages.

## Results and discussion

The result of the qualitative analysis revealed that social obligations did influence decisions of distance students in certain aspects of their lives. This fact was also confirmed by (Mattson, 2006; Usun, 2006) who found that social obligations are a major influential factor in distance student's life. Nelson et al. (2006) has summed it up well by describing PNG as a society that is rich in culture, where socio-cultural relationships are very important.

**Table 2: Summary of interview data**

CODE	THEMES/CATEGORIES	FREQUENCY	Overall %	% in category
<b>A</b>	<b>EXPECTATION</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>Approx. 37</b>	<b>100</b>
A1	Social & Cultural Obligation	32	Approx. 22	58
A2	Family Obligation	23	Approx. 15	42
<b>B</b>	<b>REASON FOR CHOOSING ODL</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>Approx. 9</b>	<b>100</b>
B1	Promotion	4	Approx. 3	31
B2	Earning while learning	9	Approx. 6	69
<b>C</b>	<b>FEE</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>Approx. 38</b>	<b>100</b>
C1	Quite high	28	Approx. 19	50
C2	No issues	29	Approx. 19	50
<b>D</b>	<b>HOW STUDENTS COPE</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>Approx. 16</b>	<b>100</b>
D1	Determination	11	Approx. 7	46
D2	Sacrifice	13	Approx. 9	54

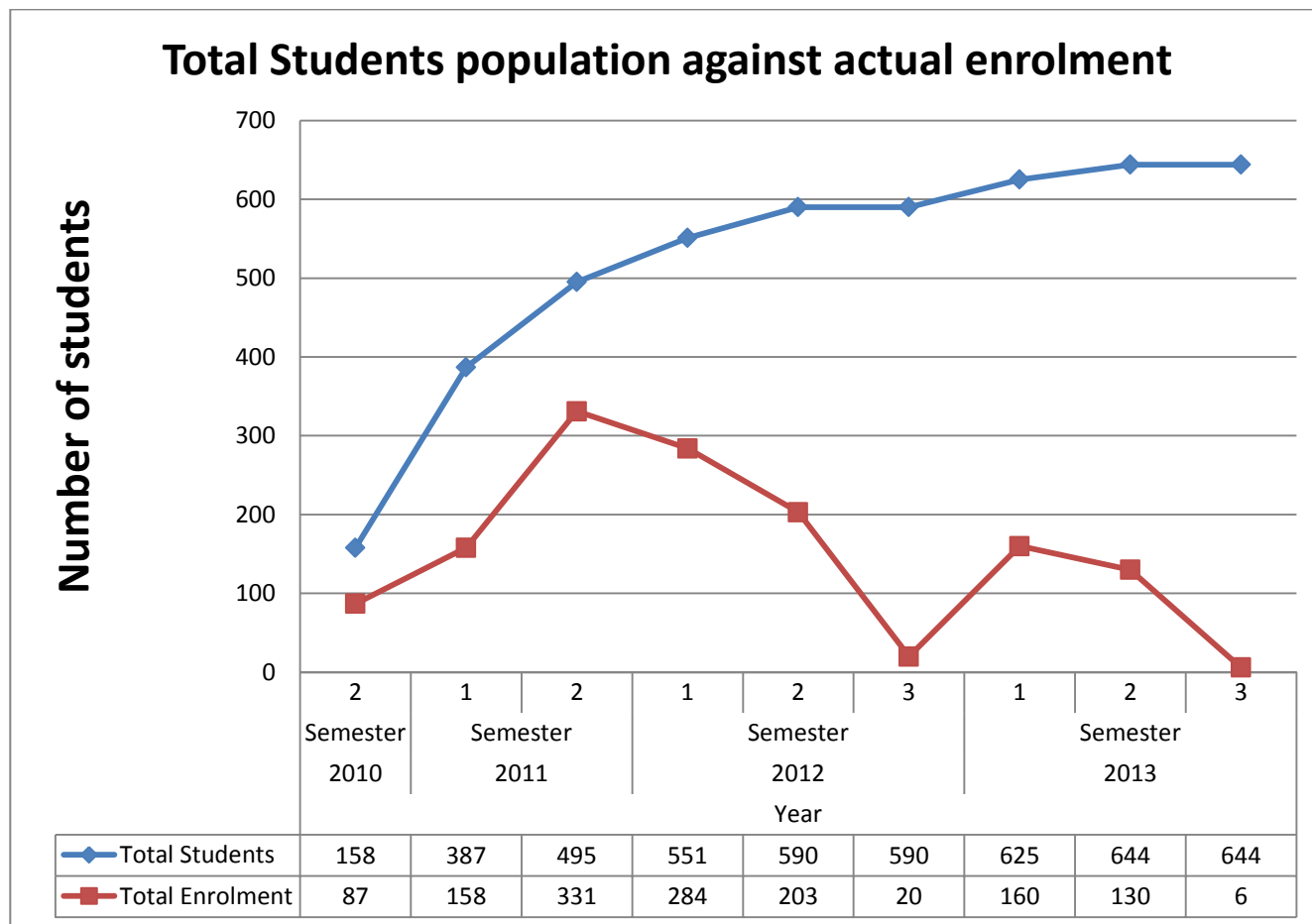
Analysis from the semi-structured interviews exposed that respective nuclear families have an immeasurable level of expectation on individual students. Their responses clearly indicated that nuclear families are a fundamental part of being parents. This, they say, has a tremendous effect on their decision making. Things like providing for daily needs, school fees and basic necessities are some of the many priorities. To some, working away from their own provinces releases the additional pressure that could have been placed on them by their tribes.

The single parents consistently repeating that coping with the conflicting priorities are second from impossible. The female participants cannot hold back from sharing the adversities they had to cope with during their studies. Things are even tougher in a society where extended and nuclear family cannot be differentiated. Individuals cannot escape the common experience of overcrowding in a family home. The Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging (2006) also verified the findings. The statement from Minnala (2012) in his non-academic paper has well summarized the fact by saying that wantok system is a saviour in times of hunger, problems and financial needs. Wantok system is a system commonly practised in Melanesia. Tanda (2011) defined wantok system as a relationship of sharing, supporting, protecting, providing, and caring that reaches out to meet the needs, wants, and desires of individuals and groups, who are related.

Those who had secured an uncommon funding from their National member of parliament and the National Department of Education indicated that without the funding they received they would not think that they will consistently enrol for units in each of their semesters. The self-sponsored students did not reserve their views but said that the distance fee is quite high. They said that the only thing they could do to see that they complete the program is to sacrifice their social responsibilities or look elsewhere for quick loans in the informal sector. It is difficult to be in the lower earning range but the reality of being a teacher in Papua New Guinea is a common knowledge (Refer to table 1).

The graph below shows the pattern of enrolment in each semester since 2010. In semester 3s from 2012, the percentage enrolment was very low compared to the fluctuating records of semesters 1 and 2. The reason being the semester is normally held during the festive season that is from November to January when students are mostly concentrated on the activities that are organized during the Christmas breaks.

Figure 1: Total Students population against actual enrolment



## Conclusion

The research has dealt with a number of significant issues relating to attrition and retention in Papua New Guinea. The investigation explored the increase in the fee and its effect on the enrolment of ODL students into courses. There are various factors that were hinging on the topic being investigated, thus the study thoroughly looked at cultural responsibilities of students to possibly find out if there is a relationship between finance and cultural responsibilities of students that might or have impacted their study with IDFL.

The findings did not conclude to say that finance and socio cultural factors had caused the high attrition rate at the University of Goroka, IDFL. But rather it shed light into the significant impacts the elements were having on the issue of attrition and retention at UOG-IDFL. By far money is a real issue to students, having it as the power to acquire more-or-less everything that could be acquired in a cash economy. Aspects such as daily needs of a nuclear family, extended family, tribe, commitments and responsibilities were exerting so much pressure on individual economic situation causing deceleration in students' education progress.

The PNG government does not even provide public loans to ODL students unlike in the US and Great Britain. Institutions are not helping either because ODL is used to generate much needed funds, thus the consequence is directed on students. The high cost of living is not helping either as individuals and their families fight to survive the tough conditions and cost of living each day. Children are forced to adopt and adapt difficulties brought forth by the sacrifices their parents took, creating unwanted issues.

The investigation has established some serious links and relationships between family, social and cultural obligations and individual finances. The elements being investigated has pulled apart individual budgets that really impacted the educational journey of the students and has contributed to the declining in the number of courses enrolled for in each semesters at the IDFL.

It is imperative that the viewpoint of consumers of Open and Distance Learning products are well understood. Thus, the issue surrounding sociocultural factors of a society, cost according to how students perceive it and costing of ODL products need to be well researched.

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