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FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE COURSES IN BACHELOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

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Abstract

This study explores factors contributing to the low engagement of Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) students in online courses at the Faculty of Education, Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). Despite integrating a Learning Management System (LMS) into a blended learning model, learner participation in online activities remains suboptimal. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine students across three B. Ed programmes in Natural Sciences, Drama and Theatre, and Special Needs Education using an exploratory qualitative design. The findings reveal organisational factors such as technical issues, delayed course availability, insufficient tutor feedback, and course-related issues, significantly affecting engagement. Student-related factors include reliance on mobile devices and the need for more motivation due to a lack of incentives. This study highlights the need for more responsive support systems, better course design, and enhanced interactive features to foster greater student engagement in online learning.

Keywords: Students Engagement, Learning Management Systems (LMS), Online Education

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Introduction

In recent years, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a highly sought-after approach in higher education. This trend is reflected in the significant global increase in distance education programmes observed over the past few decades (Nayak et al., 2021). The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) has emerged as a leader in ODL within Sri Lanka's higher education sector. Established in 1980 and modelled after the Open University UK, the Open University of Sri Lanka offers alternative pathways to higher education, especially for those who find it difficult to enter traditional universities due to the high competition involved in getting selected to them (Kurupparachchi & Karunanayaka, 2017; Perera & Abeyssekara, 2021). The OUSL caters to a large student population through its six faculties: Natural Sciences, Health Sciences, Engineering Technology, Humanities and Social Sciences, Education, and Management.

The OUSL operates through a network of nine (09) Regional and nineteen (19) Study Centres, providing students with flexible learning opportunities. The Faculty of Education (FoE) at the OUSL offers a comprehensive range of teacher education programmes, from certificate courses to doctoral degrees, catering to the professional development needs of pre-service and in-service educators. The FoE comprises four departments: Secondary and Tertiary Education, Early Childhood and Primary Education, Special Needs Education, and Educational Leadership and Management. The study departments conduct four Bachelor of Education Honours degree programmes specialising in Natural Sciences Education, Drama and Theatre Education, Special Needs Education, and Primary Education.

The OUSL uses modern technologies such as online learning management platforms to expand learning opportunities and provide access for geographically distant students. Following a capacity-building workshop conducted by the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) in collaboration with the (then) Education Technology Division (ETD) of OUSL, online teaching and learning at the OUSL was launched in 2003 (Karunanayaka, 2022). Consequently, a team of trained academic staff members developed the first online courses at the OUSL, "utilising the Manhattan Learning Management System (LMS), a basic LMS. Later, due to its more sophisticated features and capabilities, Moodle LMS replaced Manhattan as the online course platform used by OUSL in 2006. FoE also introduced online courses, initially with Master level programmes and later this was expanded to all other programmes, providing comprehensive online learning support to students (Karunanayake, 2009).

Learning Management Systems play a crucial role in the OUSL's ODL approach by providing a centralised platform for sharing learning resources including course material, for communication and learner engagement. However, it needs to be acknowledged that although the LMS facilitates online learning, the real impact on student learning comes from well-designed course content, resources, and learning experiences using appropriate features in the LMS. Effective online learning environments encourage active participation by students in co-creating knowledge and building up skills related to each course. It can be achieved by using appropriate features on the LMS which lead to collaborative activities and focusing on the quality of interactions within the online space. The instructor's role as a facilitator and moderator becomes critical in ensuring a successful online learning experience (Karunanayaka, 2009).

Durak (2024) identifies key factors for creating an effective online course experience, particularly emphasising the importance of interactive learning tools, personalised feedback,

knowledge-sharing environments, and practice-based activities. Students also value tools that enhance communication, sociability, and structured reflections on meeting course expectations. Verbal and guided feedback plays a crucial role in individual learning and facilitating collaborative work. Pre-service teachers highlight the need for tools to monitor group work and clear instructional materials to support collaboration. In their study, Uçar and Sarıtepeci (2022) explore student engagement in MOOCs, focusing on internal factors like motivation, self-efficacy, cooperation, and loyalty and external factors such as interaction, gamification, feedback, and course structure. Their findings suggest that addressing these factors holistically is crucial for improving engagement and ensuring the success of MOOCs in fostering lifelong learning. In addition, the 2023 study by Setiamurti et al. (2023) investigates the impact of various intrapersonal factors on student engagement among psychology undergraduates taking online Statistics courses in Indonesia. The study focused on Academic Intrinsic Motivation (AIM), Perceived Creativity Fostering Teacher Behavior (P-CFTB), Academic Self-Efficacy (ASE), and Self-Regulated Learning (SRL). The findings reveal that these factors collectively account for 66.9% of student engagement, with ASE having the highest influence (23.99%) and P-CFTB the lowest (9.78%). Additionally, there is a strong positive relationship between SRL and ASE.

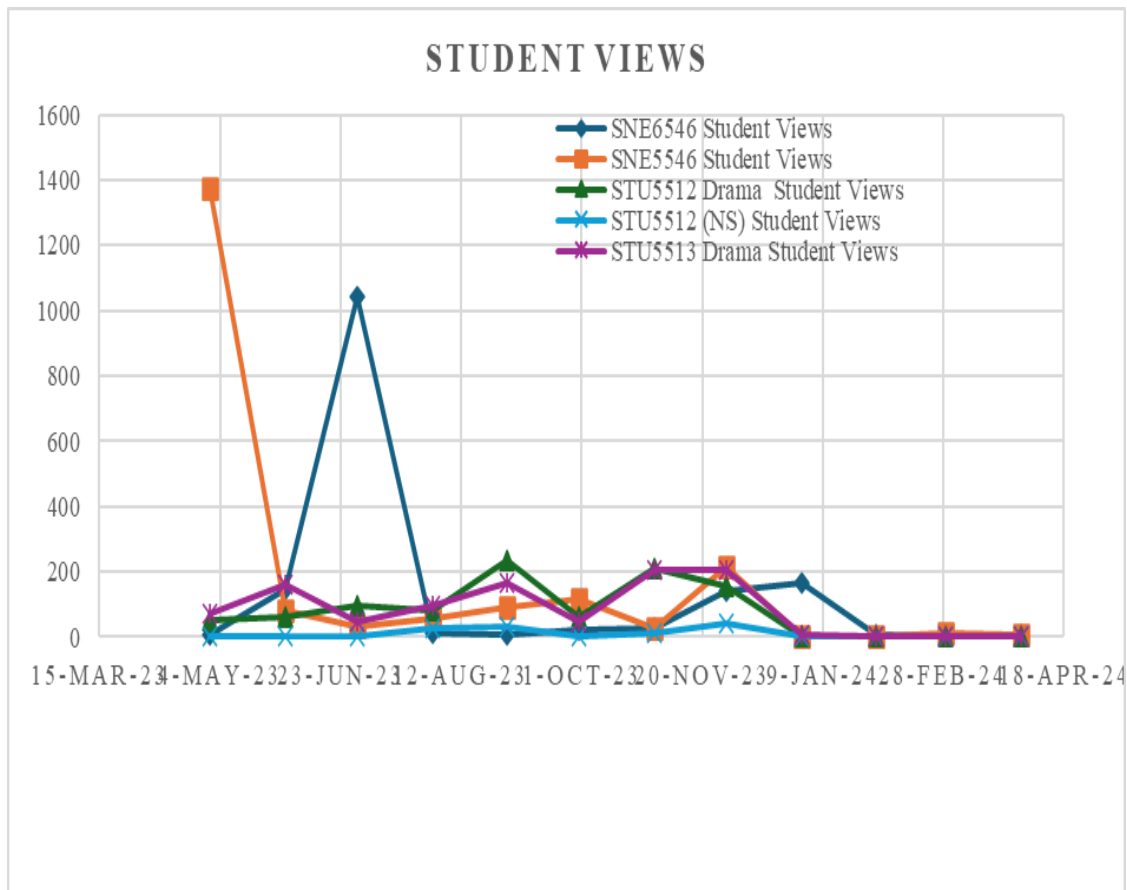
Research Problem

B.Ed. Programmes in the FoE at the OUSL utilise a blended learning approach incorporating online elements delivered through the LMS platform. However, a critical challenge the facilitators face is the low level of learner enrolment and engagement in the LMS activities (See Table 1 for details from select courses). As illustrated by the Figure, overall learner engagement in the online courses fluctuated throughout the year, with some peaks potentially coinciding with examination periods. This data highlights limited student engagement, hindering the platform's potential to enhance their learning experience. It is crucial to investigate the reasons behind this limited participation to address this issue.

Table 1
Details of Student Enrollment in the Online Courses

Course Code	Course Title	B.Ed. Programme	Enrolled numbers
SNE6546	Curriculum Development and Adaptation for Children in Inclusive Classroom	Special Needs Education	95
SNE5546	Creating the Best Educational Environment for children in an Inclusive classroom	Special Needs Education	101
STU5512	Foundation of Education	Drama and Theatre	67
STU5512	Foundation of Education	Natural Science	11
STU5513	Comparative Education and Educational Problems	Drama and Theatre	67

Figure 1
 Student Views in the Online Courses of B.Ed. Programmes



Aim and Research Questions of the Study

This study aimed to explore factors that contributed to the low level of engagement of OUSL B.Ed. students in the online courses. The following research questions were formulated to achieve the aim of the study:

- What are the organisational factors influencing B.Ed. students' low level of engagement in the online courses?
- What are the course-related factors influencing B.Ed. students' low level of engagement in the online courses?
- What are the student-related factors influencing B.Ed. students' low level of engagement in the online courses?

Methodology

The study adopted an exploratory research design as a qualitative approach, which allows in-depth exploration of a phenomenon with a small sample. A convenience sample of nine students—three each from the three-degree programmes of B.Ed. Honours in Natural Sciences, B.Ed. Honours in Drama and Theatre and B.Ed. Honours in Special Needs Education—were selected as the study

participants, and written consent was obtained to use their data for research purposes after explaining the purpose and other details of the study to them both verbally and using an information sheet in print. Table 2 summarises the demographic information of the participants. The participants were four male, and five female students aged 26 to 39. They were from various cities but had selected the Colombo Regional Centre of the OUSL for their studies. This diversity in the participants' backgrounds provided a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing their engagement in online courses at the OUSL.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used as a guide to collect in-depth data from each participant. The interviews were conducted online using the video conferencing application Zoom, and the data were recorded using the same application. The recordings were transcribed, and the typed transcriptions were analysed to gain a thorough understanding of factors that influence student engagement in their online courses.

Table 2
Participant Profile

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (in years)	Study Programme	Medium	City/Town of Residence
Arjuna	Male	32	BED NS	Sinhala	Negombo
Thara	Female	39	BED NS	English	Udugampola
Amali	Female	30	BED NS	Sinhala	Veyangoda
Vijaya	Male	28	BED DR	Sinhala	Kurunegala
Anne	Female	26	BED DR	Sinhala	Kegalle
Kavya	Female	26	BED DR	Sinhala	Kuliyapitiya
Kevin	Male	38	BED SNE	Sinhala	NuwaraEliya
Stefani	Female	35	BED SNE	English	Nattandiya
Rasika	Female	29	BED SNE	Sinhala	Galewela

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interview data revealed several issues contributing to low student engagement in online courses. These factors were categorised into three major themes: Organisational, Course-Related, and Student-Related Factors.

Organisational Factors

Some of the most salient factors that emerged from the interview data as barriers to student engagement in the online learning environment were technical issues encountered when using the LMS, non-availability of some courses on the LMS at the beginning of the academic year, and delays in receiving feedback, responses and support from the tutors and technical support staff.

Some participants expressed concerns over technical issues they had to face when accessing the online courses. For instance, they spoke of their frustration with system downtime, particularly during critical periods like examinations and assignment submission deadlines,

emphasising the need for a reliable and stable LMS infrastructure to maintain student engagement. The participants found this phenomenon to influence their motivation to engage with the online courses negatively. For example, Arjuna said, *"LMS system down is an issue... When we needed the LMS and couldn't log on to it, it discouraged us from using it."* (Arjun). It is also evident that the students expected instant help from the institution when encountering login issues, but this need still needs to be fulfilled. For instance, Thara mentioned, *"I often faced login issues, and there was no quick help available. This made me hesitant to rely on the LMS for important tasks."*

Moreover, many participants mentioned that they often used smartphones to access the LMS and sometimes faced difficulty reading and watching materials on their phones as the online platform was not designed for mobile learning. In an era of ubiquitous learning, mobile learning can affect more frequent learner engagement with online learning platforms. This is evident from Arjuna's remark, *"I preferred using my laptop because the LMS app on my phone often had issues. It wasn't always user-friendly, and this impacted my engagement."*

Several participants mentioned that not all courses were offered on the LMS at the programme's beginning, delaying engagement with online learning. This also appeared to negatively impact learner motivation and engagement. For instance, Kevin stated, *"It was frustrating to find out that we had to wait for some courses to be added to the LMS. This delay made it hard to keep up with the online learning schedule."*

In addition, even though interesting learning activities were made available in the LMS, students reported that they have yet to receive feedback from the instructors, which did not motivate them to engage in them. Amali, for instance, mentioned, *"There were assignments and activities on the LMS, but we rarely get feedback. It was demotivating to put in effort without knowing if we were on the right track."* Participants also highlighted delays in getting responses and support from the institution regarding LMS-related issues. This is evident from Kavya's quote, *"There were times when I had questions or needed help with the LMS, but the support was slow. It made it hard to resolve issues quickly and stay engaged."*

Compatibility Issues:

1. Delayed Responses and Support:

From the above analysis, it is apparent that the entire effort of providing students with access to their learning resources, activities, and assessment tasks through online platforms needs to be more organised, and the staff involved in facilitating online learner access to and engagement in online learning need to be aligned to their respective tasks.

2. Course-Related Factors

Participant interview data revealed several drawbacks related to the online courses, which had a prominent impact on learner engagement. These included issues related to the course design and structure, relevance and adequacy of learning resources, lack of interactivity and poor linkage between learning and assessment activities.

One significant course related issue identified through the interviews was the need for proper course design, structure and interface within the LMS. Several participants voiced the need to improve the LMS's content, navigation and functions. For instance, Tara mentioned,

"The course materials were outdated and poorly designed, with missing pages and incorrect session structures. This hindered my engagement." Amali's statement sheds light on the need to review and restructure the available navigation facility for LMS users: *"Some courses were difficult to navigate due to poor structuring. Logical and well-organised course structures are important for facilitating easier material exploration."* In addition, Anne mentioned that not allowing assignment submissions in the online courses also led to decreased engagement on her part.

The relevance and adequacy of course content and resources also emerged as critical factors in promoting student engagement in online courses. As apparent from the interview data, outdated reading materials, non-functional links, and lack of supplementary learning resources paved the way for limited learner engagement. Arjuna mentioned,

"Some materials were not directly relevant to our courses, necessitating external resources. Updated past papers and project-related resources are needed." Participants also stated that some of the links to online resources were non-functional, some online courses needed more learning materials, and the available learning materials did not cater to a variety of learning styles, which affected their motivation to engage with the online courses.

Limited interactivity in course-related activities also appeared to be another prominent issue, which hindered learners from investing time and effort online. More specifically, they mentioned a lack of class discussions, quizzes, and compulsory activities as discouraging regular engagement with the online courses. Among such issues, Rasika also mentioned the absence of in-built features that would reward learners on task completion, *"There were limited active discussion forums and compulsory activities. Also, there was no system for awarding badges or rewards for completing assignments or achieving goals, which demotivated me."*

Many participants stated that they accessed the online courses while preparing for assignment submissions, continuous assessment tests, and final examinations. Thara, for example, mentioned, *"When an assignment submission, final exams, or CAT is close, then I access the LMS a week before."* However, if the learning activities had been better integrated and designed to help students constructively complete their assignments, there might have been increased learner engagement with the LMS.

3. Student-Related Factors

Access to suitable devices to log into the online courses, level of digital literacy and learner motivation emerged as three key student-related factors influencing their engagement in the online courses. Interview data revealed that limited access to suitable devices like computers, tablets, and smartphones hindered LMS usage. The most preferred device used for this purpose was the smartphone due to a variety of reasons such as its speed, user-friendliness and the ability to easily access online courses even when they were travelling. However, some participants also revealed that smartphones' poor quality and occasional functionality issues posed challenges in accessing the LMS.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This exploratory study identified several factors that had contributed to low student engagement in the online courses of three B.Ed. programmes offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka. Organisational factors such as the non-availability of some courses on the LMS at the beginning of the academic year and delays in receiving feedback, responses, and support from the tutors and technical support staff were significant deterrents.

Course-related factors further hindered engagement, including poor course design, outdated content, and lack of interactivity with students. In addition, it was evident that student-related factors such as lack of suitable devices to access the LMS, low level of digital literacy, and motivational issues also played a crucial role in reducing LMS engagement. These findings underscore the need for a more robust and supportive LMS infrastructure, better-designed courses, and increased student support to enhance learner engagement in the LMS.

To improve student engagement in the LMS, it is recommended that the university address the technical issues by ensuring a reliable and stable LMS infrastructure and providing prompt technical support to students. Courses should be designed with clear structures, updated content, and interactive elements to make them more engaging. Additionally, the university should conduct orientation sessions to increase student awareness about LMS courses and provide training to improve their digital literacy. Ensuring all students have access to suitable devices and stable internet connections is also crucial. Finally, incorporating mechanisms for providing students with interactive learning tasks, making feedback available without delay and using motivational strategies can significantly enhance student engagement and the overall effectiveness of the LMS. Further research could involve conducting a quantitative survey with a wider group of undergraduate students across the faculty and the university. This would provide more insights into trends and student opinions on their engagement with online courses.

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