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Motives for Deserting the B. Sc. Agriculture Degree, Faculty of Agriculture, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Annually 09% of the students who register for B.Sc. Agriculture Degree, at the Faculty of Agriculture (FoA), Rajarata University of Sri Lanka (RUSL) have deserted the degree. The exact reason/s for the student desertion are/is unknown. A cross-sectional, self-administered, questionnaire-based survey was conducted (random sample, n=88), with the objective of finding the exact motive/s leading to student desertion of the B.Sc. Agriculture degree offered by the FoA, RUSL. Descriptive and Chi-square statistics were computed ($P < 0.05$). The key motives for deserting the B.Sc. Agriculture degree as identified by respondents (50%) were, students seeking entrance to other full time degree courses, gaining employment during the long waiting period until the intake and extension of the course beyond the specified four years. Other supplementary reasons for desertions in descending order of importance were; RUSL being a regional university, unhealthy university subculture, poor quality of food, water, lodging and infrastructure facilities of the university, and family and financial related problems. In conclusion, key motive for deserting the B.Sc. Agriculture degree offered by the FoA, RUSL was students seeking entrance to other full time degree courses.

Keywords: *B.Sc. Agriculture, Deserting, Rajarata University*

1. Introduction

Annually 09% of students who sit for General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/ L) examination gain admissions to the state universities of Sri Lanka to follow 81 different degree courses/ programs (University Grants Commission 2012). Each degree course has its own cutoff Z-score value, which is calculated for each year based on the Z-score performance of students sat for the G.C.E. A/ L examination and on the number of seats available per course for the year. Students whose Z-score exceeds the cutoff score can gain entry to a given degree course based on their preference. However, once admitted to a degree course, students have a chance to upgrade themselves into a program that they have ranked higher in preference and that has a higher Z-score than their own, if the vacancies are available in that particular degree program.

Out of all university entrants each year, 4.6% gain admission to eight Agriculture faculties in the state universities (University Grants Commission 2012). These faculties named according to the descending order of their cutoff Z-scores are; University of Peradeniya (UoP), University of Ruhuna (UoR), Wayaba University of Sri Lanka (WUSL), Rajarata University of Sri Lanka (RUSL), Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (SUSL), University of Jaffna (UoJ), UvaWellassa University (UWU) and Eastern University of Sri Lanka (EUSL). Among those students, 7.3% enter the Faculty of Agriculture (FoA), RUSL (University Grants Commission 2012).

Since the establishment of the FoA, RUSL in 2001, it has produced 471 B.Sc. Agriculture graduates of which 91% is employed (Ramanayaka et al. 2012). Annually FoA, RUSL admits 80 ± 20 , and the designated number for last intake was 150. However it is observed that, annually about 09% of the students who register for B.Sc. Agriculture Degree, FoA, RUSL had deserted the degree within first six to nine month period. The exact reason/s for the student desertion is/are yet unknown. Therefore a survey was carried out with the objective of finding the exact reason/s that contributes to the student desertion of B.Sc. Agriculture degree offered by the FoA, RUSL.

2. Methods

A cross-sectional, self-administered, questionnaire-based survey was conducted. The questionnaire was validated by a pilot study. Survey encompassed both deserters and undergraduates of FoA, RUSL. A closed-ended ordinal polytomous questionnaire was used for the deserters ($n=65$, during 2004 – 2007). The questionnaire had ten main causal factors for desertions (Table 1). An open-ended questionnaire was used for undergraduates of FoA, RUSL ($n=71$, 2007/08 intake). Confidentiality and anonymity was ensured thus positive responses entailed consent.

Descriptive statistics and Chi square test were carried out. Significant differences were defined at $P < 0.05$. All analyses were performed using Minitab 18.0 statistical software.

3. Results

A total of 88 respondents satisfactorily completed the questionnaire, of which 17 were deserters. Deserters were aged 23 ± 2 years and 53% were females and their hometowns were 251 ± 36 km away from Anuradhapura. All deserters had two siblings on average, of which 65% were still unemployed.

Over 50% deserters and undergraduates of FoA, RUSL agreed that admission into other full time degree/diploma courses or employment opportunities as the main reason for deserting the B.Sc. Agriculture degree (Table 1). Of the deserters, 82% did gain admission to other degree/diploma programs or were employed. Many deserters gained admission into degrees offered by the UoP, UoR, SUSL, EUSL and other external or foreign degrees, and nursing diplomas. The few employed deserters were in the army, banking sector or in farming while others were staying at home without being employed or studying.

Long waiting period until intake and extension of duration of the degree program beyond the specified four years at FoA, RUSL (65%) and FoA being a regional university (35%) were identified as the second and third motives for desertion of B.Sc Agriculture degree by the deserters. However, undergraduates disagreed with these reasons (Table 1). Medium of instruction being English was highlighted as a main motive for deserting the degree by 49% of undergraduates, whereas deserters' disagreed that the medium of instruction as being a motive (12%; Chi square; $P < 0.001$; Table 1).

Both deserters and undergraduates had common agreement that, inhuman ragging during fresher's orientation, inability to adapt to university subculture, aggressive behavior of senior students and the pressure from the

student union, personal problems at home, and poor quality of lodging, food and water are the next set of motives for desertion (Table 1).

Both deserters and undergraduates identified that poor infrastructure and learning environment of the faculty as the least significant motives for deserting the degree (Table 1). Lack of enthusiasm for the B.Sc. Agriculture degree was a minor reason offered by deserters (18%) while undergraduates assigned even lower weight to the fact (04%).

Table 1 : Motives for deserting the B.Sc. Agriculture degree

| Main motives | Percentage response | |
|--|---------------------|--------------------------|
| | Deserters (n=17) | Undergraduates (n=71) |
| 1. Long waiting period until intake in to B.Sc. Agriculture, FoA, RUSL and extension of course duration beyond the specified four years | 65 | 24 |
| 2. Admission into other full time degree courses or employment opportunities | 53 | 51 |
| 3. The FoA, RUSL being a regional university | 35 | 08 |
| 4. Inhuman ragging carried out during fresher's orientation program | 29 | 37 |
| 5. Poor quality of lodging, food and water | 29 | 20 |
| 6. Inability to cope with the university subculture, aggressive behavior of senior students and student union limiting the student freedom | 24 | 27 |
| 7. Personal problems related to family, health and finance | 24 | 35 |
| 8. Lack of enthusiasm for the course | 18 | 04 |
| 9. Poor infrastructure and learning environment of the faculty | 18 | 20 |
| 10. Difficulty of adapting to the medium of instruction: English | 12 | 49 |

4. Discussion

During the long waiting period (6 – 12 months) until the registration to the university or the intake, entrants sought employment or entrance into other courses (degree/diplomas) that ensured employment. Although the employment rate of B.Sc. Agriculture graduates is nearly 70 – 90% (Perera & Perera n.d.; Ramanayaka et al. 2012), the motivation to seek employment may have been due to the extension of the degree program beyond the specified four years. During the past ten years, the duration of the B.Sc. Agriculture degree has been extending 6 – 12 months on average. Further, the motivation to seek employment may have been enhanced by having more siblings who are dependents, poor financial and health status of breadwinners of the family (Table 1).

Deserting the B.Sc. Agriculture degree at FoA, RUSL was mainly due to students gaining admission into other full time degree courses offered by national universities through vacancy filling process (Table 1). The degrees to which they upgraded had higher cutoff Z-scores compared to the B.Sc. Agriculture Degree, FoA, RUSL. Further, these degrees are preferred by the deserters as they were offered by universities closely located to their home towns than FoA, RUSL, which is 251 ± 36 km away from their homes (Table 1). However, undergraduates who remained in the faculty did not identify the distance between homes and FoA, RUSL at Anuradhapura as a significant motive for deserting the degree.

Ragging, threats to student life due to aggressive behavior of the seniors and pressure from the student union were some reasons that both deserters and undergraduates agreed upon as the motive for deserting. During the past 44 years, since the beginning of University College of Ceylon in 1970, ragging lead to 15 dead (including two suicides) and 25 paralyzed (Indika Sri Aravinda n.d.). Further, ragging in state universities of Sri Lanka has lead to about 6000 students giving up courses within the last 44 years (Indika Sri Aravinda n.d.).

The major points which undergraduates and deserters disagreed upon were; lack of enthusiasm for the course and medium of instruction being English. However, it is noteworthy that undergraduates indicated the lack of

enthusiasm as four times a less likely cause of desertion, than the deserters, while the exact opposite was true for medium of instruction (Table 1). However, poor quality of food, drinking water, lodging, infrastructure and learning environment were causes of desertion, agreed upon by both deserters and undergraduates.

5. Conclusions

The key motives for deserting the B.Sc. Agriculture degree offered by the FoA, RUSL were students seeking entrance to other full time degree/diploma courses and gaining employment during the long waiting period until the intake. Desertions are exacerbated by being a regional university, unhealthy university subculture, poor basic facilities (food, water and lodging), and infrastructure of the FoA, RUSL and family and financial related problems.

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