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# A SURVEY OF GRADUATES OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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## **Abstract**

*The Open University of Sri Lanka, established in 1980, has conferred degrees on several batches of students since 1990. However, published information on the performance of these graduates is not available. Nor has any systematic research been carried out on this aspect. Hence this survey on the graduates of the Open University of Sri Lanka was initiated under the ODA/OUSL Distance Education Project. The main objective of this preliminary survey was to collect base-line information about OUSL graduates. In addition, a study of the differences, if any, between the various types of degree-holders was also intended. Related data were obtained through questionnaires sent to all graduates who graduated from the three faculties in 1996.*

*The findings of this survey revealed that these categories of graduates varied with respect to age, gender composition and employment. Most graduates came from Colombo or the bigger towns and had not acquired their entire tertiary education at the OUSL alone. Investigation of their background revealed that they also differed with respect to qualifications on admission, level of entry, time taken to graduate, marital status, number of dependants, financial*

*and employment status while studying, study patterns and study centres. Most graduates felt they had not made maximum use of the available facilities. Most also seem to have decided to register at the OUSL in order to secure employment or promotions, achieve higher income levels and better social standing rather than improve knowledge and skills, develop their personality and broaden their horizons. Though most were not willing to study in the English medium, after graduation, the majority indicated their appreciation of having had to do so. Most graduates were satisfied with the recognition given to their degrees although a few expressed dissatisfaction. All graduates expressed a desire to have regular contact and interaction with the OUSL.*

*The findings of this survey are based on data obtained from the responses from a single batch of graduates. Further studies with detailed analyses and repeated surveys should be carried out to obtain more representative information.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), established in 1980, is a national university where students can pursue further studies through distance education techniques. Since 1990, several batches of students have been conferred degrees but published information on the performance of these graduates after the completion of their degree programmes is not available. Nor has any systematic research been carried out on this aspect. Hence this survey of graduates of the OUSL was initiated under the ODA/OUSL Distance Education Project.

### **Objectives**

The objective of this preliminary survey was to collect base-line information about OUSL graduates. In addition, a study of the differences, if any, between the various types of degree-holders was also intended.

Aspects considered were:

- General information about the OUSL graduates with special reference to employment status.
- Investigation of the background of these undergraduates while at the OUSL.
- The impact of study programmes on individual graduates.
- Recognition of the OUSL degree.
- Future interactions with the OUSL.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Survey Instrument**

Based on the objectives of the survey and the practical constraints in carrying it out, a questionnaire was selected as the most appropriate survey instrument. Since the mailing addresses of all OUSL graduates were available, the survey was administered by post.

A suitable questionnaire was first designed and thereafter, an appropriate code sheet for this questionnaire was prepared. (The questionnaire was prepared only in English as all OUSL graduates are expected to be competent in this language.) The final version of the questionnaire and the code sheet were produced after a pilot survey carried out on a sample of 25 OUSL graduates; this was then revised in a number of ways followed by several revisions. The sources used to design the survey instrument are listed under References.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part I - "About You" - had 14 questions seeking general information on OUSL graduates, such as, the type of degree, class, age, gender, employment status, district of residence and additional qualifications acquired. Part II - "Your Undergraduate Days at the OUSL" - consisted of 20 questions based on entry details such as qualifications on admission, level of entry, time taken to graduate and details of study environment such as, marital status, dependants, financial and employment status while studying, study patterns, district of residence and use of facilities at the OUSL.

Part III - "You Today" - had 10 questions which addressed the impact of the study programme at the OUSL on individual graduates, such as expectations at registration and achievements on graduation, skills gained and the adequacy of the skills for the particular degree achieved and changes as a



person. Recognition of the OUSL degree gained and expected future interactions with the OUSL were also investigated.

## **Sampling**

The entire cohort of graduates, one year after graduation was selected as the sample. Thus the total population of OUSL graduates who had been conferred degrees at the 1996 Convocation was selected for this survey which was carried out in 1997.

The composition of this population was as follows:

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.)* Graduates	117	48
Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.) Graduates	110	46
Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech.) Graduates	14	06

Total number of OUSL graduates = 241

\* This included 4 Bachelor of Education (Natural Sciences) graduates

The reason for selecting the entire population was that the total number was of a manageable size for such a survey. The latest batch of graduates to pass out was not selected as they would not have had adequate time to judge the merits and demerits of the degree they had so recently obtained. Batches prior to 1996 were not selected as these graduates may have forgotten relevant details and may not have been in a position to give accurate responses to the questionnaire.

Since the survey was in essence a census, sampling procedures were not required.

### Rate of responses

Responses were collected for a period of eight weeks (with a reminder sent after a period of three weeks) before proceeding with the analysis. All responses received were dated and recorded.

Of the letters dispatched, a very satisfactory response rate of 55% was achieved, the break down being 48% of the total of B.Sc. graduates, 71% of the total of B.Tech. graduates and 58% of the total of LL.B. graduates (Figure 1).

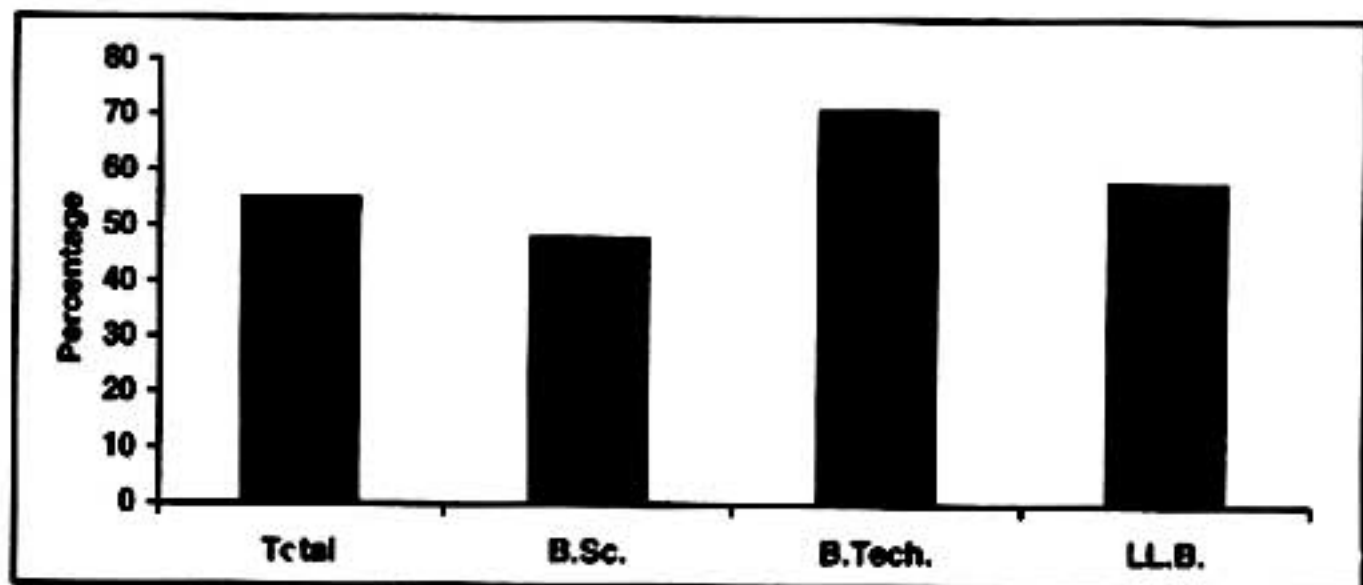


Figure 1 - Responses to questionnaire

### Analysis

The survey was designed so that the responses could be recorded as numerical data on spreadsheets for easy access and subsequent analysis. Accordingly, the responses received were entered into spreadsheets utilizing the code sheet prepared for the questionnaire.

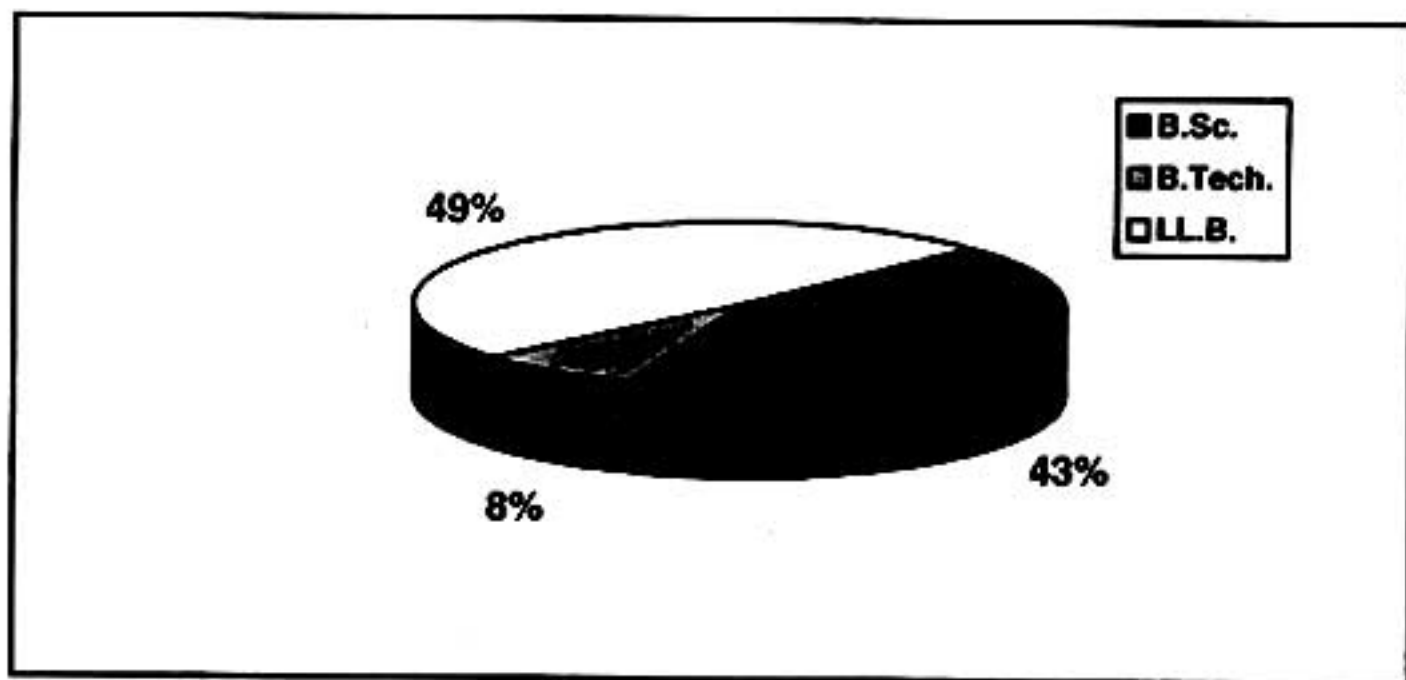
Using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) a descriptive analysis of the responses was carried out on the basis of the frequencies of responses. Frequencies were recorded as percentages. They were then depicted graphically as histograms or pie-charts.

## **FINDINGS OF THE SURVEY**

### **INFORMATION ABOUT OUSL GRADUATES**

#### **Degrees and classes**

Of the total number of respondents, 43% were B.Sc. graduates while 8% were B.Tech. graduates and 49% were LL.B. graduates (Figure 2). This corresponds approximately to the proportion of graduates who have been conferred degrees in 1996. Over 95% of all three categories of degree-holders had obtained pass degrees, that is, only 5% of the graduates had been conferred first or second class degrees.



**Figure 2 - Responses by degree**

## Age on graduation & gender composition

The age on graduation ranged from less than 30 to 70 years, the majority for the B.Sc. graduates being less than 30 years (76%); B.Tech. graduates being 31-40 years (80%) and LL.B. graduates ranging from 31-70 years (Figure 3). This indicates that the majority of B.Sc. respondents fell into a younger group than the majority of B.Tech. graduates while the LL.B. graduates had a wider age range.

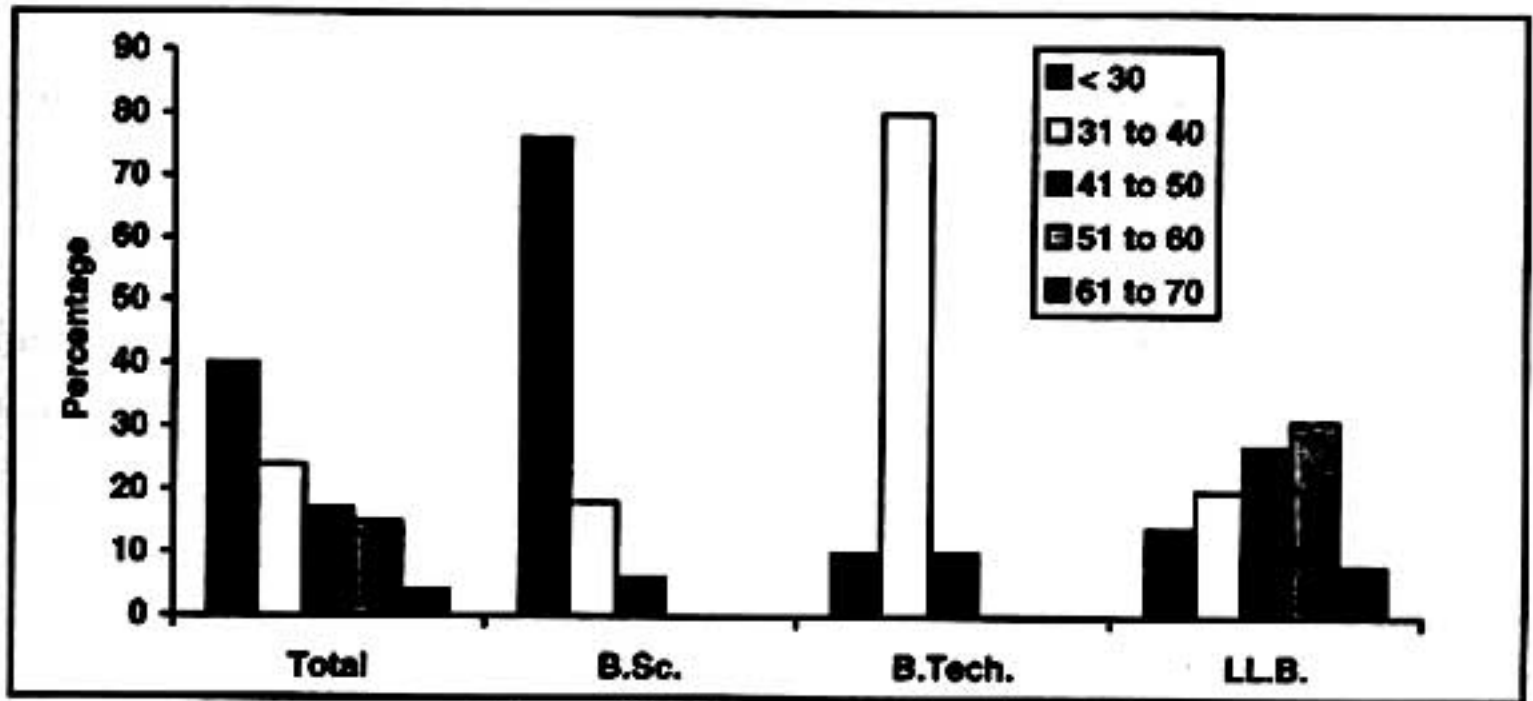


Figure 3 - Age on graduation

The percentage gender composition of the respondents were 39:61, 66:34, 20:80 and 19:81 for total, B.Sc., B.Tech. and LL.B. graduates respectively (Figure 4). The B.Sc. graduates differed in this aspect from the other two degree-holders as there was a greater proportion of females in this cohort.



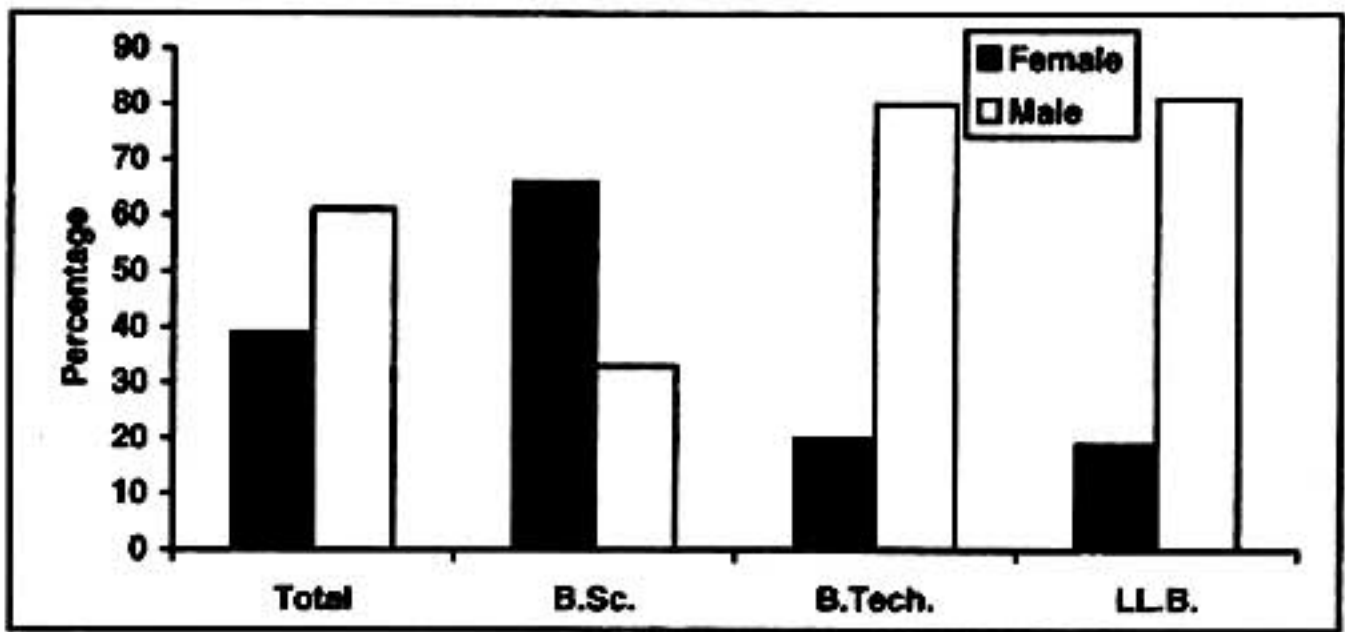


Figure 4 - Gender composition

### Employment & financial status

The majority of the respondents were employed, the percentages being 80%, 80%, 100% and 77% respectively for the total, B.Sc., B.Tech. and LL.B cohorts. (Figure 5). Most had permanent employment and were either in the government or semi-government sector.

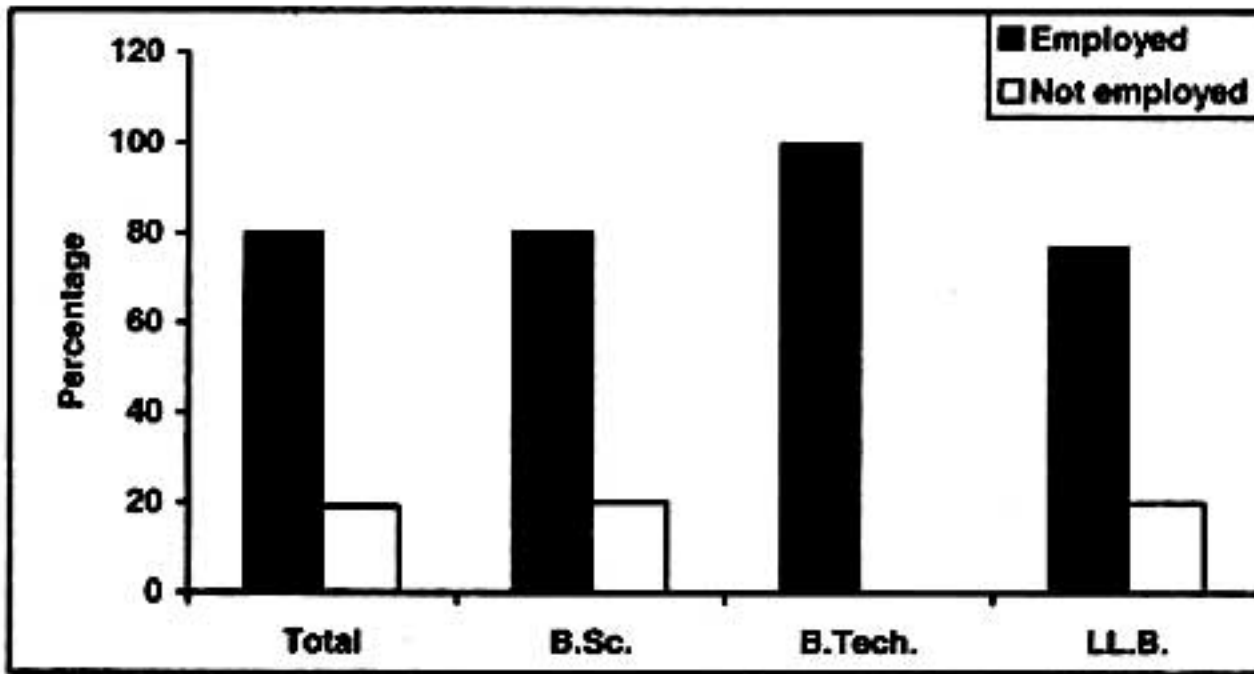


Figure 5 - Employment status after graduation

Of the B.Sc. graduates (39%) had secured a job for the first time and 48% secured a new job after graduation while most of the B.Tech. graduates (60%) had remained at the same job at the same grade after graduation. Most LL.B. graduates were at the same job (36%) or had found new jobs after graduation (34%).

The income level ranged from less than Rs.2500/- to over Rs.25,000/-. Most of the B.Sc. graduates (48%) were in the Rs.2501/- - 5000/- range while most of the B.Tech. graduates (40%) were in the Rs.5001/- - 7500/- range. Most LL.B. graduates (41%) were however, at a higher income level in the range of Rs.10001/- - 25,000/-.

A majority of B.Sc. and LL.B. graduates (52% and 41% respectively) felt they were appropriately employed while more B.Tech. graduates (70%) felt they were under-employed.

### **District of residence**

The majority of all categories of graduates were from Colombo, the percentages for the total being 41% and that for B.Sc., B.Tech. and LL.B. being 47%, 50% and 34% respectively. Other high percentages were recorded from the districts of Gampaha, Kalutara, Kandy, Kurunegala and Matara.

### **Other qualifications**

Many of graduates had other qualifications, the percentages being 73%, 61%, 80% and 83% for the total, B.Sc., B.Tech. & LL.B. graduates respectively. The type of qualification varied among the three groups (Figure 6).

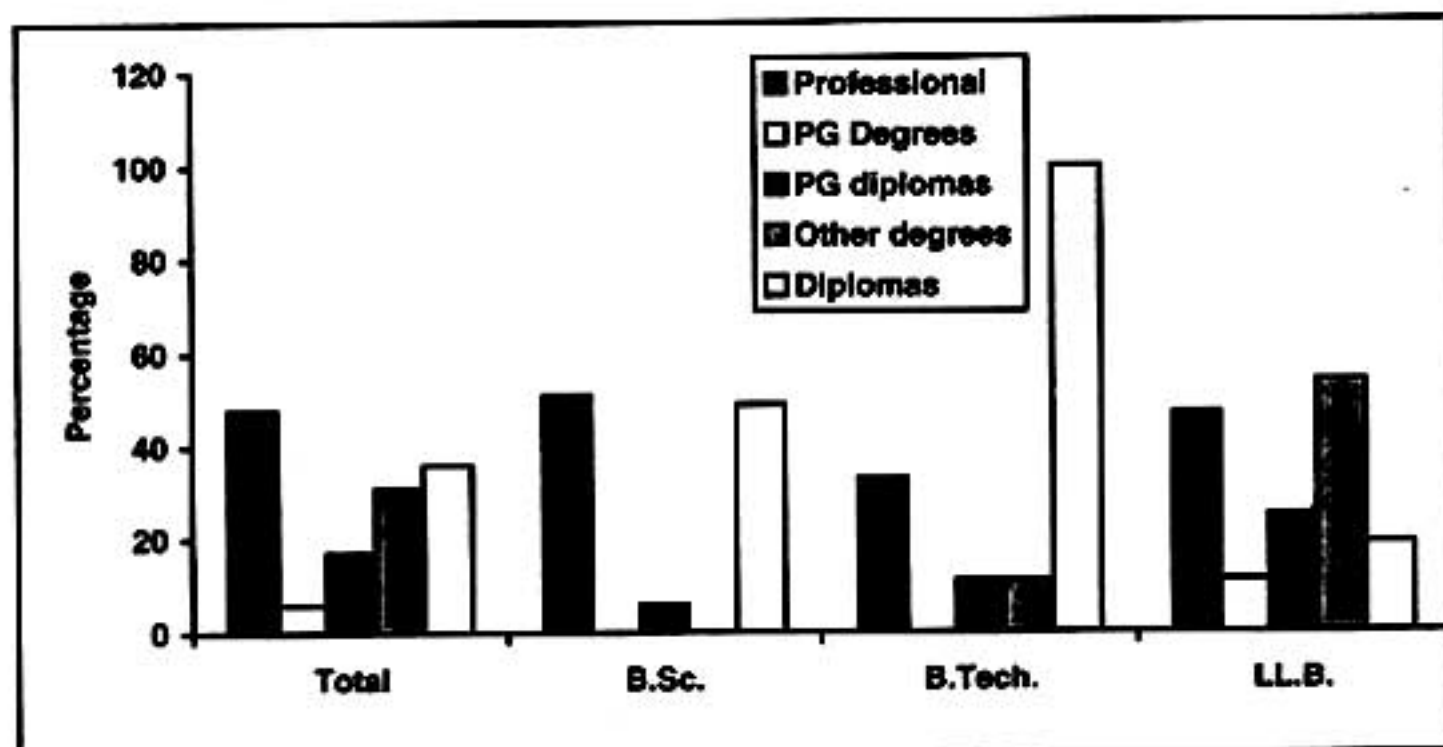
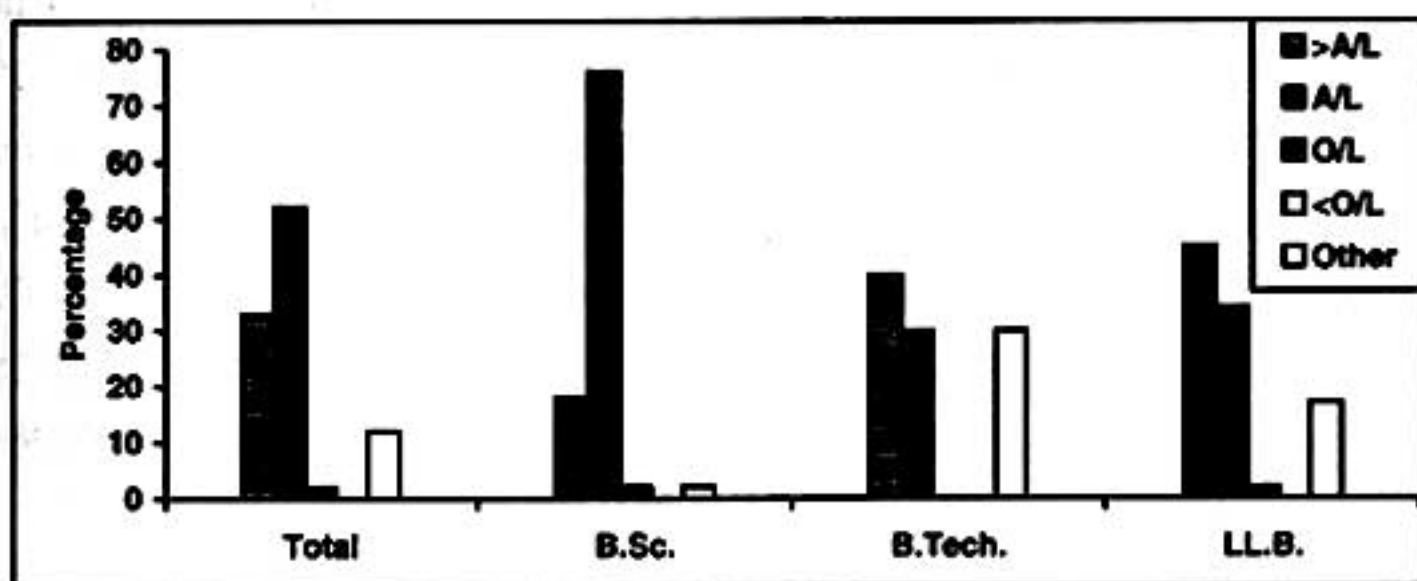


Figure 6 - Other qualifications obtained

## BACKGROUND OF UNDERGRADUATES

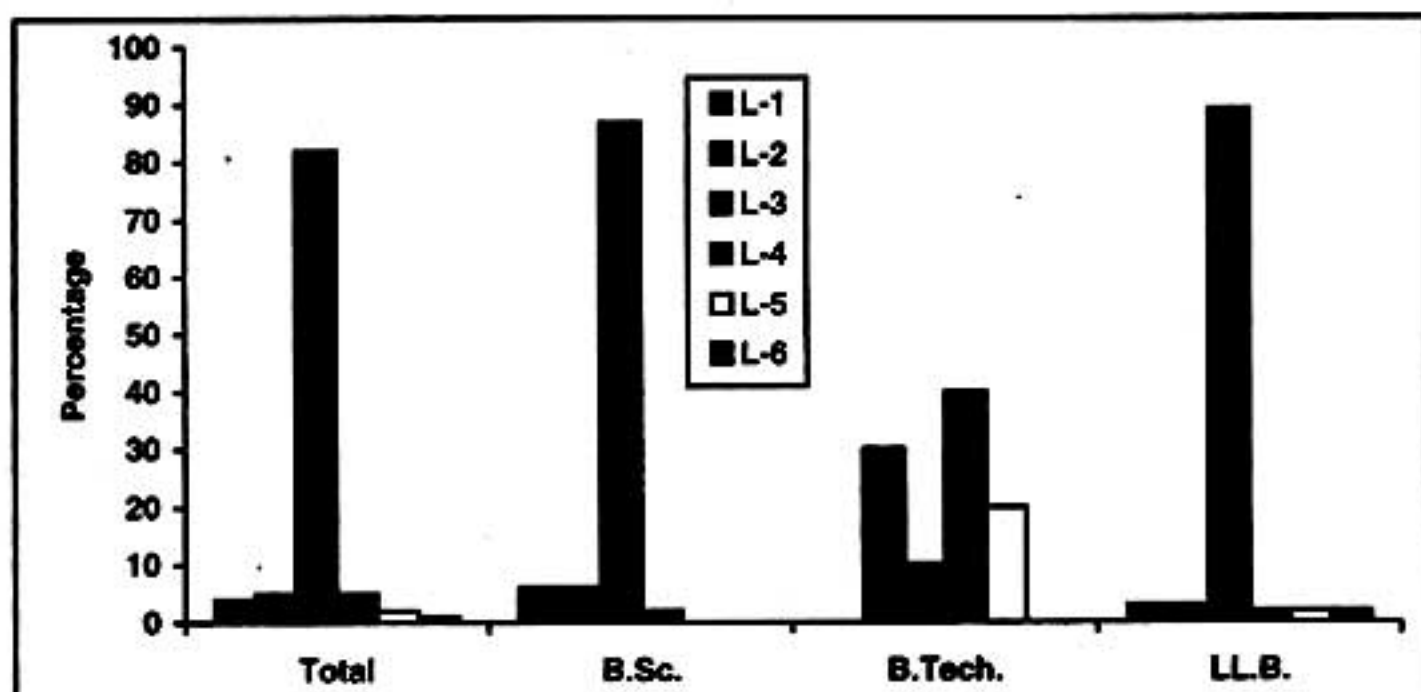
### Qualifications on admission, level of entry & time taken to graduate

Almost all the respondents had some sort of qualification at the time of joining the OUSL. When the total number of respondents was considered, most of the graduates possessed General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) [GCE (A.L.)] qualifications at the time of entry. However, in the case of B.Tech. graduates, 30% of them had joined the university without G.C.E.(A.L.) qualifications although they possessed other qualifications to enter at Level 2. Interestingly, 40% of the B.Tech. graduates had possessed qualifications above the G.C.E.(A.L.) and 30% have had G.C.E.(A.L.) qualifications on admission. Of the LL.B. graduates, 45% had qualifications above G.C.E.(A.L.) while 34% of them had entered with G.C.E.(A.L.) qualifications and 17% had entered with other qualifications. The majority of the B.Sc. graduates (76%) had entered with G.C.E.(A.L.) qualifications while 18% had entered with qualifications above G.C.E.(A.L.) (Figure 7).



**Figure 7 - Qualifications on admission**

The majority of the graduates (82%) had entered at Level 3 (the lowest undergraduate level) of the respective programmes. This was true in the case of B.Sc. graduates (87%) and LL.B. graduates (89%). However, for B.Tech. graduates, the entry level varied significantly. 40% had entered at Level 4, while 30% had entered at Level 2, 20% at Level 5 and 10% at Level 3. This was in keeping with the different standards of qualifications possessed on entry (Figure 8).



**Figure 8 - Level of entry**

Of the total, 64% had taken five to ten years to complete studies at the OUSL. This was true of the majority of the LL.B. students (91%). 5% however had taken less than five years while another 4% had taken between 11 to 15 years. Most of the B.Sc. graduates (67%) had taken less than five years while the rest of them had completed within five to ten years. The B.Tech. graduates again showed a wide variation which could be attributed to different entry levels. 50% had taken between five to ten years, 30% less than five years while 20% had taken 11 to 15 years (Figure 9).

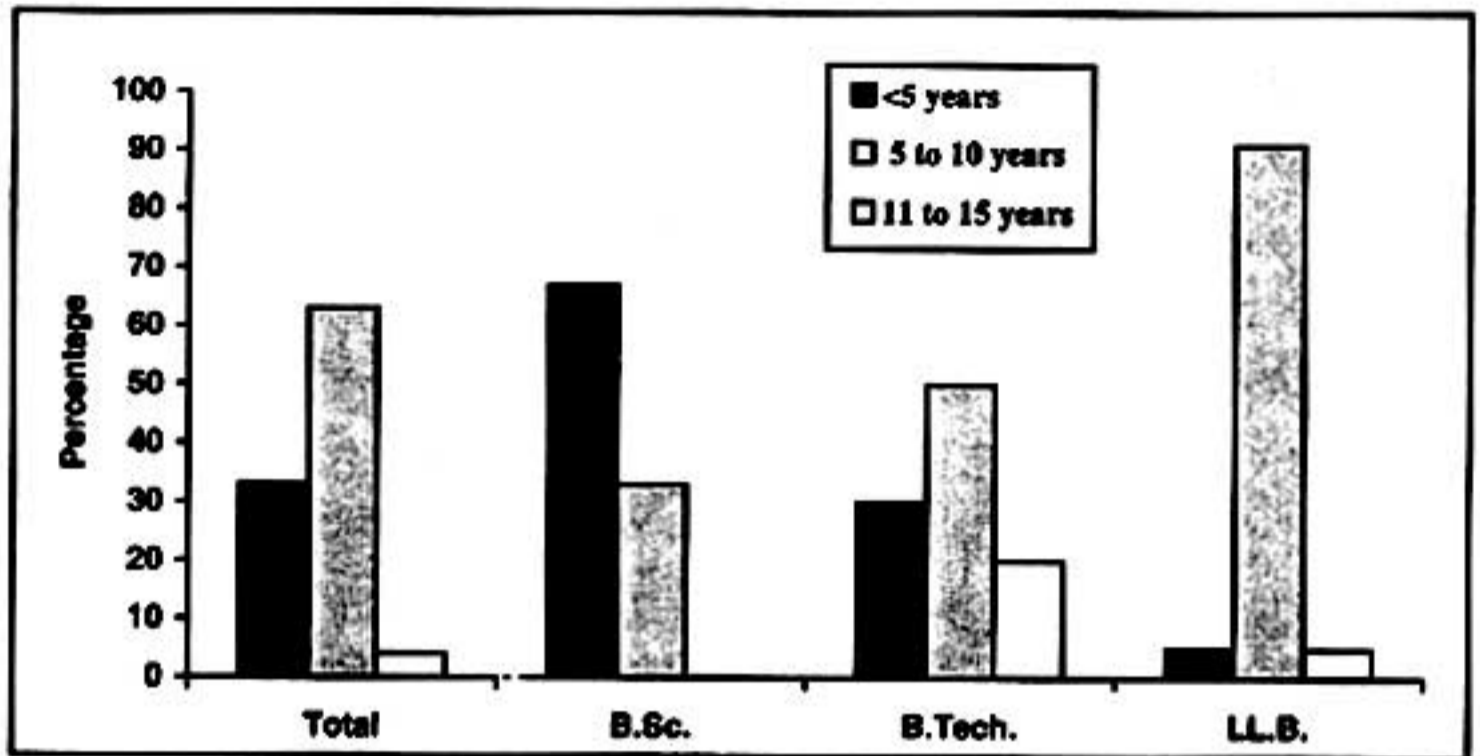
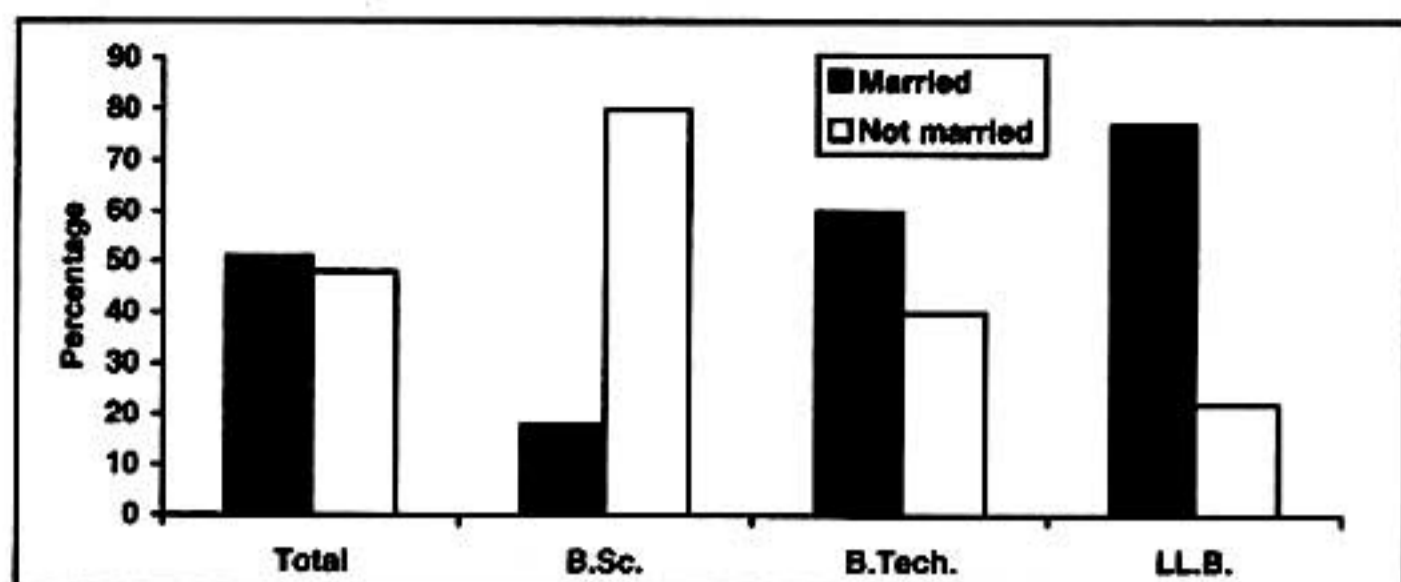


Figure 9 - Duration of study

### Marital status & dependants

Almost half (51%) of the respondents had been married at the time of registration. This however, varied among the faculties. A high percentage of the LL.B. graduates (77%) and B.Tech. graduates (60%) had been married while 80% of the B.Sc. graduates had been unmarried at the time of entry (Figure 10).





**Figure 10 - Marital status**

As seems likely from the above observations, the majority of the LL.B. graduates (83%) have had dependants while studying at the OUSL while 60% of the B.Tech. graduates and 36% of the B.Sc. graduates had dependants.

### **Financial & employment status**

Of the total, 29% have had financial problems while studying at the OUSL. This percentage is slightly higher for the B.Sc. graduates (35%) which may be attributed to their being unemployed while studying. Only 20% of the B.Tech. graduates and 27% of the LL.B. graduates, had said that they had financial problems while at OUSL. Of the total, 20% of the B.Sc. graduates, 30% of the B.Tech. graduates and 34% of the LL.B. graduates had indicated that they did not face financial problems while studying at the OUSL. The rest have all indicated that they have not had too many financial problems.

In accordance with their employment status, the majority of B.Tech. graduates (90%) had self-financed their studies while 78% of the LL.B. graduates and only 38% of the B.Sc. graduates had done so.

If all the respondents are taken together, 56% of them had been employed throughout the duration of the programme of study at the university and only 15% had not been employed at all during this period. The rest had been employed most of the time or part of the time. However, there is much variation among the faculties. The majority of the B.Tech. graduates (80%) had been employed throughout their duration at the OUSL while the other 20% of them had been employed for most of the time and none had been totally unemployed within this period. Of the LL.B. graduates, 72% had been employed throughout their study period at the university while 14% of them had been employed for most of the time and 5% for some of the time. Of them, 8% had not been employed at all during this period. Of the B.Sc. graduates, only 33% had been employed throughout the study period while 22% had been employed for most of the time and 16% some of the time. However, 27% of them had not been employed at all during their OUSL days (Figure 11).

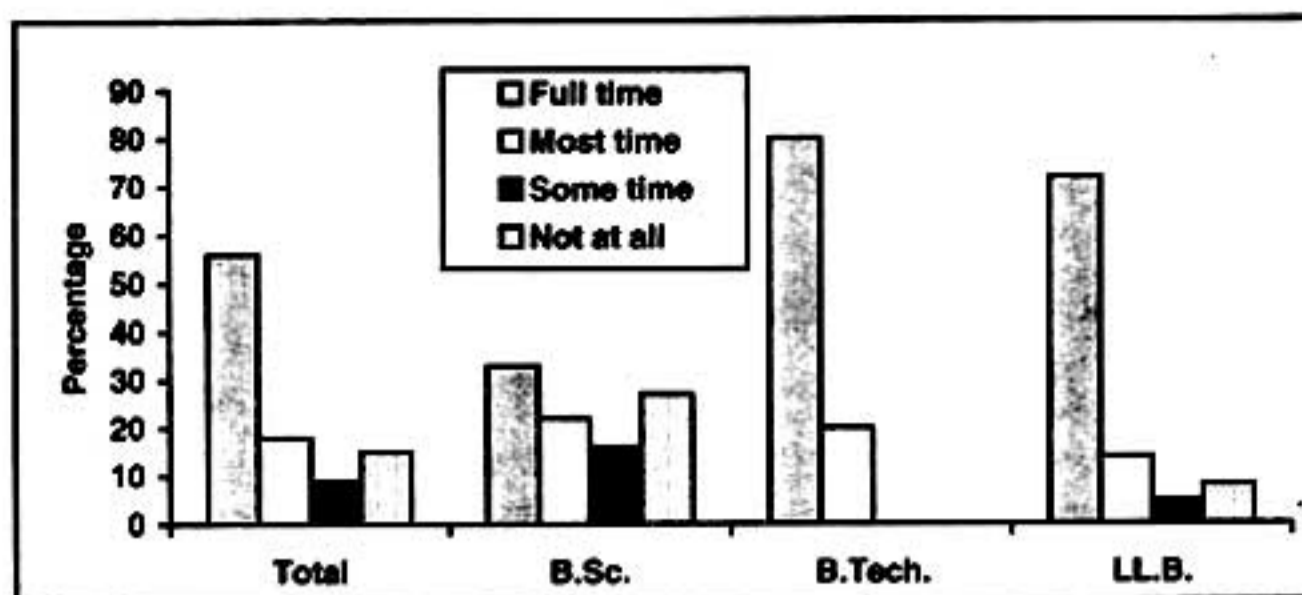


Figure 11 - Employment status while studying

### Study patterns, regional centres & use of facilities at OUSL

The questionnaire responses show that study patterns varied widely. While the majority of the B.Tech. graduates (70%) studied alone in isolation, 20% of them had studied in groups at the OUSL and 10% had studied in groups away from the OUSL. Of the LL.B. graduates, 42% studied in isolation, while 39% of them studied in groups at the OUSL. Many B.Sc. graduates (49%) however, studied in groups at the OUSL while only 33% studied in isolation (Figure 12).

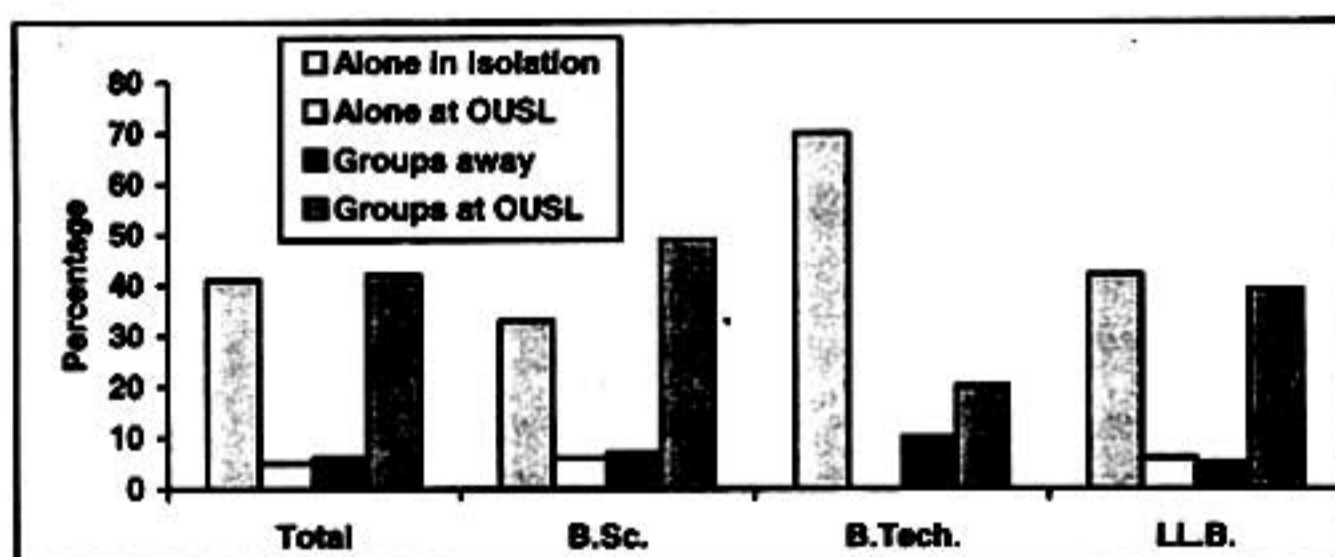
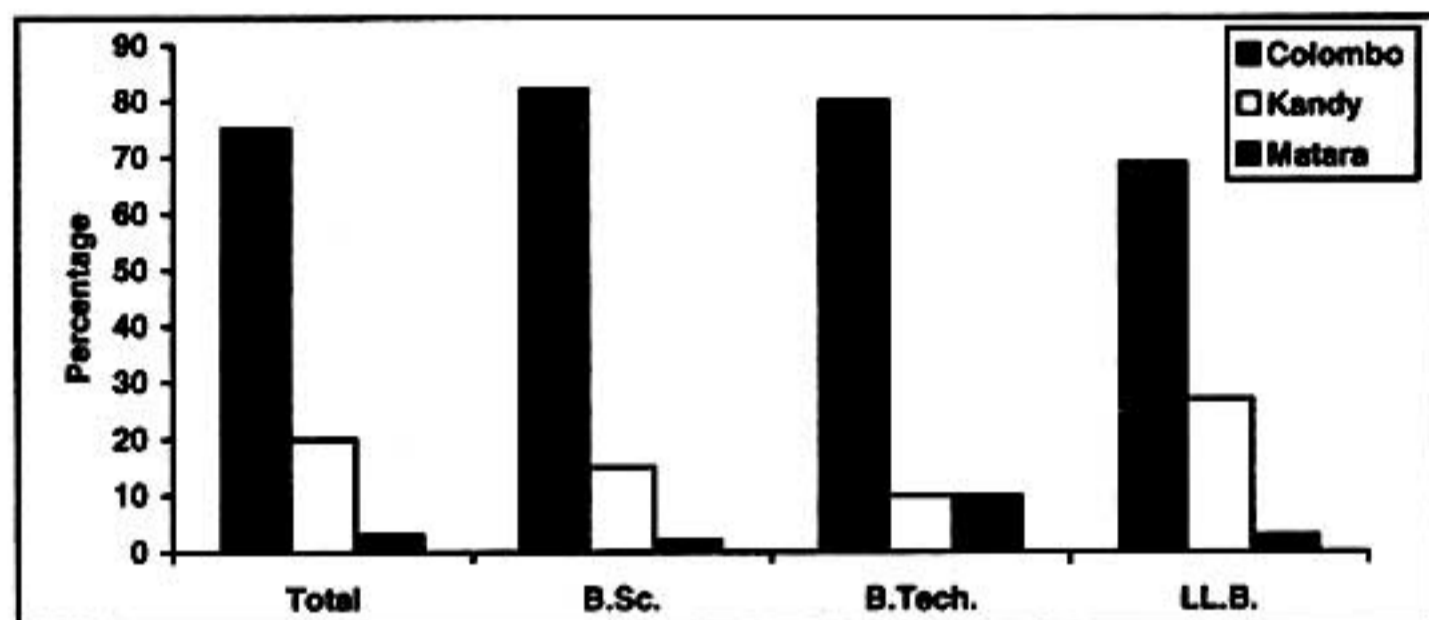


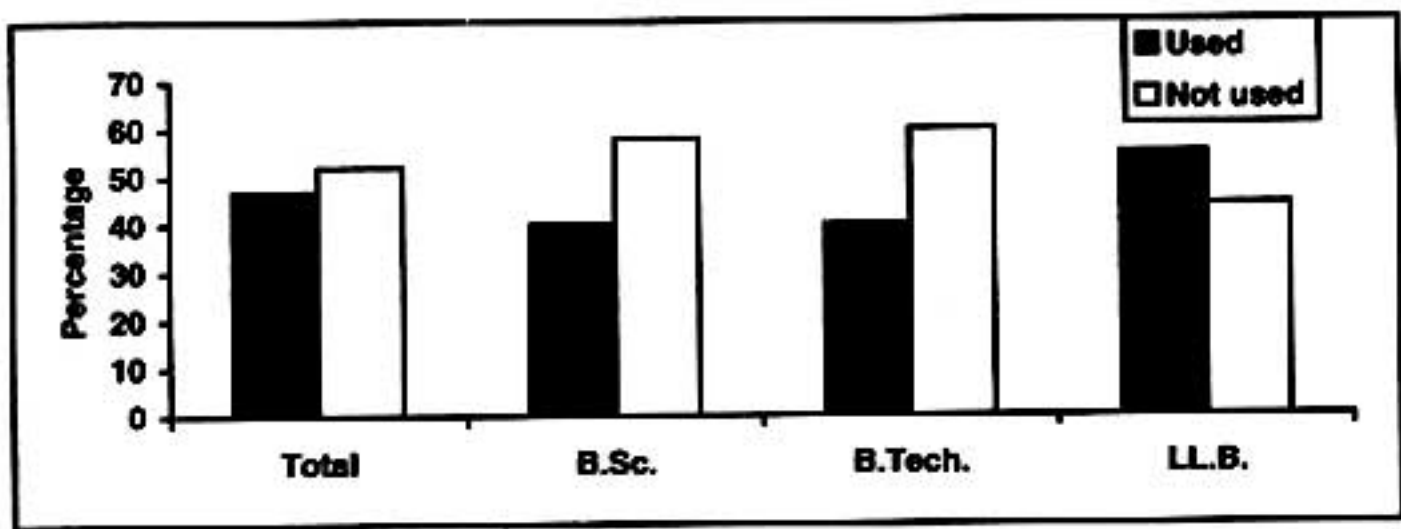
Figure 12 - Study patterns at OUSL

The majority of graduates (75%) had registered at the Colombo Centre. This is true of the B.Sc. and B.Tech. graduates, the percentages being 82% and 80% respectively. LL.B. graduates, however, varied with 69% registered at Colombo, 27% at Kandy and 4% from Matara. Of the B.Sc. graduates, 15% had been registered at Kandy while only 3% had registered at Matara. Of the B.Tech. graduates, 10% had registered at Kandy while another 10% had done so at Matara when studying at the OUSL (Figure 13).



**Figure 13 - Regional centre affiliation**

Many of the respondents (52%) had not made optimum use of the facilities offered by the OUSL. This was true in the case of B.Sc. and B.Tech. graduates with 58% and 60% respectively saying so. However, more (55%) of the LL.B. graduates had indicated that they had made maximum use of the facilities offered by the OUSL (Figure 14).



**Figure 14 - Use of services at OUSL**

Of the respondents who have indicated that they could not make maximum use of OUSL services, the majority (55%) had given lack of time as the reason. This is particularly true for B.Tech. graduates with 83% of them giving lack of time as the reason. This is in accordance with the employment status of these graduates while studying at the OUSL. The same reason was given by 57% of the LL.B. graduates and 49% of the B.Sc. graduates. Distance was also given as another popular reason. Of the B.Sc. graduates, 44% had said that distance was a reason for insufficient use of OUSL services. Of the LL.B. graduates, 41% had said so while only 17% of the B.Tech. graduates had indicated so.

## **IMPACT OF STUDY PROGRAMME ON INDIVIDUAL GRADUATES**

### **Expectations and achievements**

It could be seen that the majority of graduates had expectations of achieving economic and social benefits such as securing employment or promotions, achieving higher income levels and better social standing rather than getting themselves equipped with knowledge and skills while being students at the OUSL. Nor had they expected any personality changes. Contrary to this, the results indicated that they had not achieved the former to their levels of expectations although they had achieved the latter.



## **Language preference**

At the time of registration, 50% wanted to study in their first language and 44% in English. The others had not indicated any particular preference. However, after graduation their views had changed drastically. After graduation, 65% have claimed that they are glad to have studied in English while only 22% had claimed they would have preferred to have followed the program in their first language. The preferences again differed among the faculties. Of the LL.B. graduates, 63% had preferred to follow the program in the first language while only 30% of them had preferred to follow in English at the time of registration. However, after graduation, 45% claimed that they preferred English as the medium of instruction. Of the B.Sc. graduates, 55% preferred the English medium while 42% had preferred the first language at registration but after graduation, 84% had given preference to English and only 7% had indicated preference for the first language. For B.Tech. graduates, the majority (80%) had preferred English as the medium even at the time of registration, while all of them preferred English as the medium after graduation. It can be said that though most of the graduates were not willing to study in the English medium at the time of registration, they appreciated having had to do so after graduation.

## **Recognition of the OUSL degree**

The majority of B.Sc. graduates (51%) and LL.B. graduates (69%) indicated that the OUSL degree was given recognition similar to that of conventional universities while only 10% of the B.Tech. graduates agreed with this view (Figure 15). With respect to similar qualifications, 51% of the B.Sc. graduates and 58% of the LL.B. graduates indicated recognition while none of the B.Tech. graduates felt so. Based on the recognition given by the employers, none of the B.Tech. graduates had felt that they were given due recognition whereas 29% of the B.Sc. graduates and 42% of the LL.B.

graduates felt they were recognized. With respect to recognition of the degree by work colleagues, the responses of B.Sc., B.Tech. and LL.B. graduates were 31%, 50% and 59% respectively, while with respect to recognition by society in general the responses were 35%, 10% and 63% respectively (Figure 15). Hence the opinion of the B.Tech. graduates differed from those of B.Sc. and LL.B. graduates.

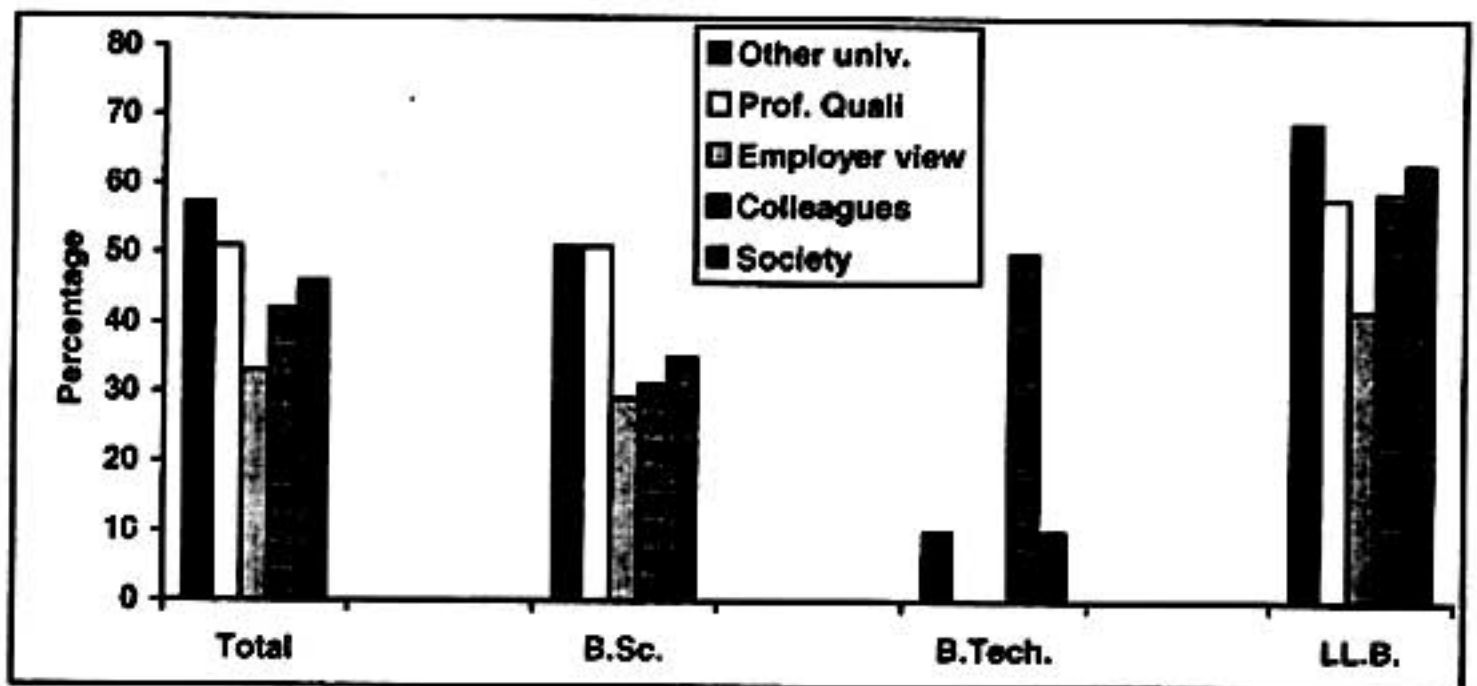
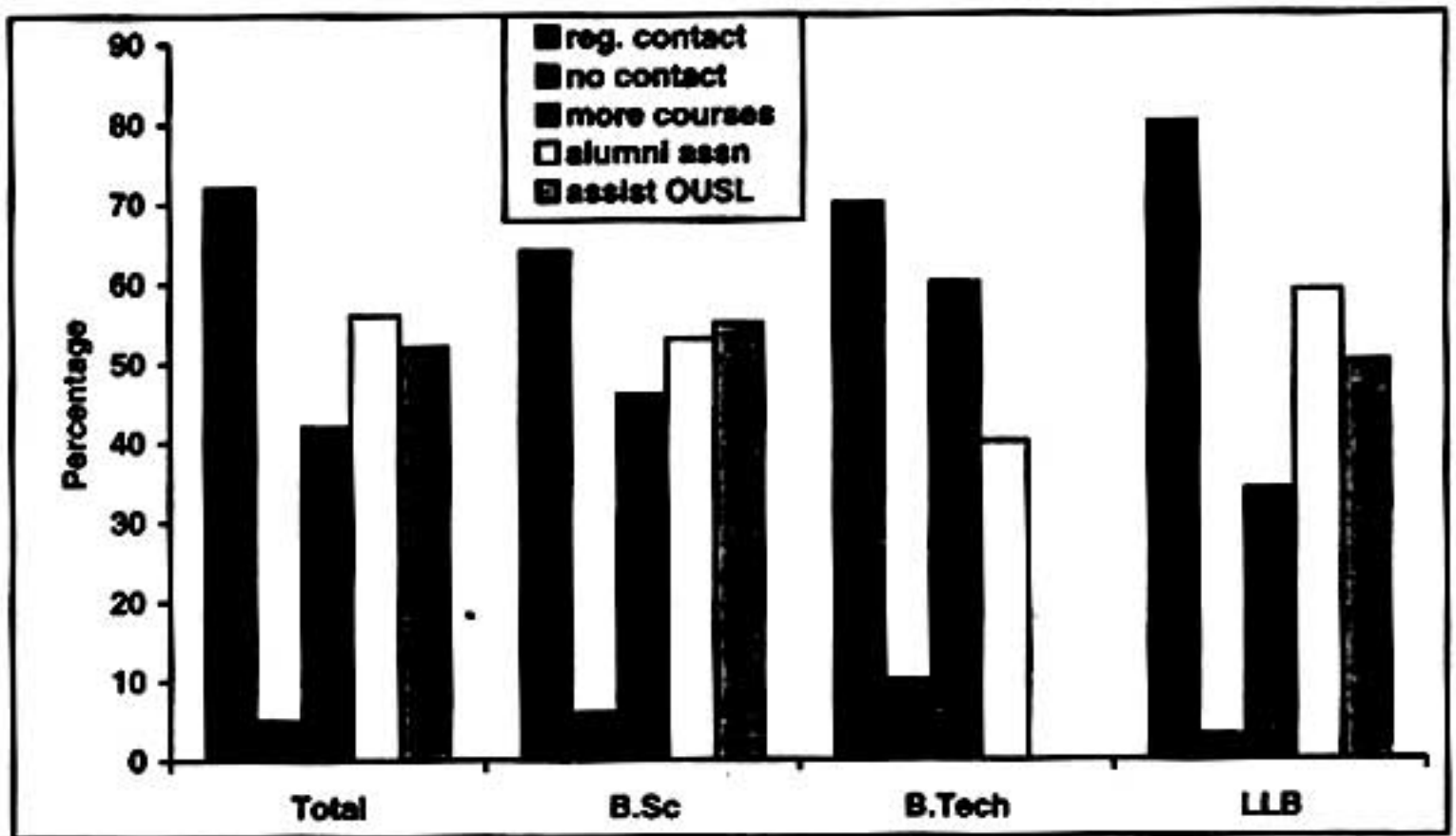


Figure 15 - Recognition of the degree in the graduate's opinion

### Future interactions with the OUSL

Most graduates had plans to have regular contact with the OUSL, the responses being 72% of the total and 64%, 70% and 80% for the B.Sc., B.Tech. and LL.B. graduates respectively. However, 5% of the total and 6%, 10% and 3% of the B.Sc., B.Tech. and LL.B. graduates respectively, did not feel the need to have any further contact with the OUSL. Some hoped to register for more courses at the OUSL while most planned to join the OUSL Alumni Association. Some had intentions of assisting the OUSL in some way (Figure 16).



**Figure 16 - Future plans at OUSL**

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE SURVEY**

The data obtained and its analysis have been presented in the preceding sections.

However, the following limitations should be noted:-

- **Effect of the sample being limited to one cohort**

The findings of this survey are based on data obtained from the responses of a single cohort of graduates. Repeated surveys should be carried out to obtain more representative information.

- **Effect of partial responses**

Even among those who responded, certain selected questions were not attempted resulting in fairly high percentages of missing values. Although a correction was made, these partial responses may have distorted the results somewhat.

- **Effect of limited numbers in the B.Tech. category**  
The sample population of B.Tech. degree-holders consisted of only ten graduates, that is, about 8% of the total in this survey. This could have distorted the overall findings.
- **Lack of detailed statistical analyses**  
Statistical analysis of the responses on correlation between variables was not carried out. It is expected that such an analysis would be carried out at a later date.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

With the limited analysis performed, the following conclusions could be drawn, subject however, to verification with further detailed analyses and repeated surveys.

- The majority of OUSL graduates had been awarded either B.Sc. degrees or LL.B. degrees while only a very small percentage of graduates were B.Tech. degree-holders. Very few had obtained first or second class degrees while the majority had received pass degrees.
- Most B.Sc. graduates were within the age category of 30 years or less while most B.Tech. graduates were around 31-40 years on graduation. LL.B. graduates ranged from 30-60 years. Such heterogeneity of age distribution has been reported by Jayatilleke, *et. al.* (1997) in their studies on student characteristics at the OUSL. However, here too a high percentage (88%) of B.Sc. degree students was found to be under 30 years of age. In comparison the conventional universities on the other hand showed a marked homogeneity with respect to age, with the majority of students being in their early twenties; (Jayatilleke *et. al.* 1997)



- The B.Sc. cohort had more females than the B.Tech. and LL.B. cohorts. A corresponding pattern has been observed in earlier studies on OUSL students (Jayatilletek, *et. al.* 1997) where female participation was found to be higher than male participation in the B.Sc. programme while all other programmes showed a higher male participation. However, studies on Open University (OU) graduates in the United Kingdom by Woodley (1988) reveal that female graduates out-number the males in all programmes.
- Most OUSL graduates were employed after graduation. More B.Sc. graduates had either found employment or changed jobs after graduation. Studies by Last and Woodley (1987) reveal that younger graduates benefit more with respect to employment. Of the category of graduates who had reported occupational benefits, 76% were of under 30 years. A similar pattern is also observed among the B. Sc. graduates in this survey. Most B.Tech. graduates of the OUSL felt they were under-employed after graduation.
- The majority of the OUSL graduates had not acquired their entire tertiary education and training at the OUSL alone. They also came from the bigger towns in the country or its environs or were probably from where there was easy access to an OUSL centre at which the relevant degree was available.
- The majority of the graduates possessed at least (G.C.E.) A.L. qualifications or its equivalent or a higher qualification at entry to the degree programme. A corresponding trend is observed in studies carried out in the Open University, United Kingdom (Woodley, 1988). However, most graduates in United Kingdom had teaching certificates as entry qualifications.



- Most B.Sc. and LL.B. graduates at the OUSL had entered at Level 3 while the entry level had varied for most B.Tech. graduates. Most B.Sc. graduates had taken less than five years to graduate while B.Tech. and LL.B. graduates reflected variation in time of completion which can be again attributed to the different levels of entry.
- The majority of the B.Tech. and LL.B graduates were married, had dependants and self-financed their education while the B.Sc graduates were unmarried with no dependants and were financed by their families while studying at the OUSL. A similar civil status showing direct relationship with age is revealed in studies by Jayatilleke, *et. al.* (1997) where the unmarried percentage was found to be higher for programmes having a greater number of students of the younger, under 30 year category. Of the total OUSL graduates, 56% have had employment throughout their studies. Studies by Woodley (1997) reveal that a greater majority (79%) of the OUUK graduates were in paid employment on entry.
- Most B.Tech. graduates had studied alone in isolation while most B.Sc. and LL.B. graduates had studied at the OUSL, in study groups. This may be an indication that the B.Tech. programme is probably better designed as a distance education programme for continuing education. However, the very small sample of B.Tech. students may vitiate this conclusion.
- Most graduates felt they had not made maximum use of the facilities available at the OUSL, the commonest reason given being lack of time.
- The majority of the OUSL graduates seem to have decided to register at the OUSL in order to secure employment or promotions, achieve higher

income levels and better social standing rather than improve knowledge and skills or develop their personalities. However, they admit that they have gained the latter although they have not achieved the levels of expectations in the former. Expectations similar to these have been expressed in studies made by Jayatilleke, *et. al.* (1997). However, studies by Woodley (1997) on goals and achievements of Open University graduates in United Kingdom have revealed that aims concerned with personal development were most frequently mentioned.

- Though most OUSL graduates had not been willing to study in the English medium, the majority of graduates indicated their appreciation of having been made to do so.
- The majority of B.Sc. and LL.B. graduates were satisfied with the recognition given to their degrees *vis-à-vis* those of conventional universities. However, the B.Tech. graduates were not satisfied with the recognition given to their degree.
- Most graduates expressed a desire to have regular contact and interaction with the OUSL.

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