

COMMUNICATION

Problems Experienced by Female Distance Education Students at IGNOU: Why do Some Consider Dropping Out While Others Decide to Stay?

MARGARET TAPLIN

The Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, SAR China

Abstract: *The purpose of the project was to investigate factors that can cause women students to consider dropping out their distance education studies. Data were collected from a sample of 50 female students from Indira Gandhi National University using a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Comparisons were made between those students who had been tempted to give up their studies and those who had never considered doing so. Some of the major problems that tempted the former group included disillusionment of getting assignment marks that were lower than they had hoped for, personal problems or family problems, including difficulties with caring for young children, and difficulties with getting course materials in time to complete assignments or examinations. Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations for encouraging women students who might be tempted to quit their studies.*

Introduction

It is increasingly being argued that distance education has the potential to address many of society's current problems and contribute to the enhancement of human development (Wong, 1992; Sharma, 1996). Dhanarajan (1998) particularly emphasised the potential of distance education to reach people who are "marginalised, underprivileged and unreachable by counterparts in traditional institutions" (p.4). However, even with distance education, there is evidence that there are certain groups who are not being reached. Empirical data collected across Asia has given some indication of who some of these people might be. For example Wong (1992) showed that, consistently, the majority of adult students in distance education courses fell into the categories of male, single, urban residents, middle income earners, aged under 30 years and employed in the public or private sectors. The groups that were frequently the least represented in enrolment figures were female, married, non-urban residents, low income earners, aged over 40 years and unemployed, self-employed or involved in agriculture. To give some

indication of these figures, averages have been calculated from the data reported for a randomly selected sample of 20 courses (Wong, 1992). These are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Average percentage of total distance education enrolments
(calculated from 20 Asian courses described in Wong, 1992)

Age	Under 30	47.6%	Over 40	10.0%
Gender	Male	65.3%	Female	31.7%
Residence	Urban	73.0%	Rural	26.2%
Marital Status	Single	71.0%	Married	25.0%
Employment	Public or Private Sectors	77.6%	Agriculture/Self Employment/ Unemployment	15.0%
Income	Middle	60.5%	Low	

While it must be acknowledged that people in the former categories have different motivations for participating in education than those in the latter, it is still clear that there certain groups of people who are not accessing it for whatever reasons. And at the very bottom of the list must be those who fit into all of the under-represented categories, that is the middle-aged, married women from low income groups in non-urban areas. In fact, throughout India there is substantial evidence that adult women are seriously under-represented in education (ACEID, 1998, Kanwar, 1998) and that, for those who do enrol, the attrition rate is often higher than for that of male students or they take much longer to complete their courses (Kirkup and von Prummer, 1997). And yet these are the very people who are most in need of access to education that may well be their only avenue to improving the quality of their economic, social and spiritual lives and/or coping with changes to their living standards, and be protected from exploitation (Dhanarajan, 1998). Even more seriously, it means that opportunities are being restricted for these women to fulfil their collective responsibility to participate in the process of bringing about social change (Sesharatnam, 1995). Certainly those women who do successfully complete courses in distance education describe the experience as 'life enhancing' (Kirkup and von Prummer, 1997). Because of complex interactions of social, cultural, religious and economic factors, women in India, and indeed throughout Asia, have needs and priorities that are different from those of men (Kanwar, 1995a, 1995b), and hence it is important to carry out investigations that account for these unique needs and priorities.

Considerable research literature has addressed the dual issue of factors that contribute to women enrolling in higher education and to completing courses successfully, and the problems that can contribute to their doing badly in or withdrawing from higher education courses. These factors are not, of course, all unique to women, but it is commonly acknowledged that there are certain needs and expectations of women that have direct bearing on their success in higher education.

The purpose of this paper is to examine these needs and priorities in the context of problems experienced by female distance education students which might contribute to their dropping out of their courses. The issue of student attrition has been under

investigation for many decades. Earlier research has indicated that it is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be attributed to characteristics of the students such as age and motivation (Kennedy and Powell, 1976), and demographic variables such as educational background, employment characteristics, financial status, marital and family status (Bhatnagar, 1975, Kennedy and Powell, 1976). While some of these factors, such as race, age, gender and socio-economic status, are beyond the control of universities (Cooke, Sims and Peyrefitt, 1995), there are many ways in which universities may be able to do more to prevent attrition if sufficient information is available to understand more about it (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1996). These potentially preventable reasons for university students dropping out fall mostly into the two categories of social and personal adjustment and academic adjustment. If data are available to predict which students are at risk of dropping out, then counselling staff and academics will be able to focus attention on addressing potential problems before they occur (Cooke et al., 1995).

Social and Personal Adjustment

One very significant factor that can affect adult students', and particularly women's, participation and retention in higher education is the social context. In many western and Asian countries, there is a pervading expectation that education is more important for males than for females (Tremaine and Owen, 1984). An outcome of this can be lack of emotional support, lack of financial support, or even demonstrated hostility concerning their studies (Lunneborg, 1994). Financial problems also play a major part in contributing to student dropouts (Cullen, 1994; Young, 1994; Fan and Chan, 1997). Where there are large numbers of children in families the preference is often given to boys because they will be relied upon to support their parents in their old age (Gandhe, 1998). In India there are many examples that these social expectations can be further compounded by religious or cultural taboos that make women financially dependent and unable to travel beyond the immediate neighbourhood to participate in studies (Kanwar, 1995a). Women's studies can also be affected by the fact that they are often trying to balance multiple roles and hence can be particularly vulnerable to the effects of family and domestic interruptions, or domestic organisation (Parer, 1988; Lunneborg, 1994; Gandhe, 1998). This conflict between their studies and other commitments in their working or family lives has been identified as one of the major reasons for adult students, and particularly females, to drop out of their courses (Louttit, 1968; Cullen, 1994). This has particularly been a problem if the students have experienced any change in any personal or work-related circumstances after commencing their courses (Smith, 1987). It can be compounded by the fact that educational institutions often fail to give appropriate support for multiple-role students (Home, 1995). All of these social factors that contribute to lack of emotional or financial support for women studying are contradictory to evidence that women students thrive best in supportive environments where they can share their problems and achievements (Brunner, 1991, Lunneborg, 1994, Burnham, 1998). It has been suggested (Kirkup and von Prummer, 1997) that more female than male distance education students suffer from the isolation of studying at a distance, and that for women it was particularly important to have access to some sort of personal communication with the university to 'humanise their studies' (Hipp, 1997, p.44).

Arising from the restrictions imposed by social context is a range of personal or

personality problems that characterise many adult women with respect to their participation in education. One is that they tend to lack confidence and to be too hard on themselves when things are not going well (Home, 1995, Sesharatnam, 1995) and equate failing in their studies with failing as people (Burnham, 1988). In particular, they often set even higher standards for themselves in their domestic and mothering roles in attempt to compensate for the changes they have to make to fit in their studies (Kirkup and von Prummer, 1997) Because of this, they can be de-motivated easily (Cullen, 1994) and find it difficult to cope particularly with seeking help or approaching lecturers in the traditional teacher-student hierarchical roles, and they respond better in situations where learning is communal and shared equally between learners and teachers (Kanwar, 1995a; Parer, 1988). Being overwhelmed by such feelings of inadequacy and distress when they are faced with the new demands of their studies has been linked to student attrition (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1996).

From another point of view, Cooke et al. (1995) suggested that students with internal locus of control, that is those who attribute their success or failure to internal factors such as effort, are more likely to feel able to influence circumstances and persevere than those who attribute their successes and failures to external factors beyond their control. Cullen (1994) reported that women were more likely than men to be affected by the outside pressures of external factors that they perceive to be beyond their control.

Willingness to seek help for personal or academic problems may also be a factor that distinguishes between the students who drop out and those who persevere. Fan and Chan (1997) found a positive link between attendance at face-to-face sessions and perseverance, while Rickinson and Rutherford (1996) found that, amongst those who eventually dropped out, while a high percentage sought help from their personal tutors, a low percentage sought assistance from student support or counselling services.

Another aspect of emotional factors that can affect study success is the phenomenon of examination anxiety. Not only has this been shown to disrupt performance (Onwuegbuzie and Seaman, 1995; Cantazaro, 1996), it can also lead to pessimistic behaviour in the time leading up to it. For example, Martin (1997) found that people's overall general anxiety increased significantly when they were close to an examination, whilst Dewberry and Richardson (1990) found that people's general optimism was reduced if they were experiencing pre-examination anxiety. Cantazaro (1996) suggested that this can be compounded if, for some reason such as previous unsuccessful experiences, the student anticipates failure. Based on these research findings, it may be reasonable to conjecture that students who may be able to cope with difficulties associated with their studies during the semester when there is comparatively little pressure, fall apart and are unable to cope when they have the added anxiety of the approaching examination.

A less commonly documented issue, but nevertheless one that may very well be relevant to student attrition is that some students have been found to drop out simply because they have accomplished their own educational goals from the course, have attained whatever they set themselves to attain, and have no need to continue (Louttit, 1969; Cox, 1984).

Academic Adjustment

There are two main ways in which academic adjustment has been found to influence

students dropping out and there is evidence to suggest that these may particularly affect adult women. One is course difficulty and the other is inappropriateness of the course to the student's needs or interests. For example, Chyung, Winiecki and Fenner (1998) found that adult distance learners who dropped out often did so because they were dissatisfied with the course content or learning environment, or there was a discrepancy between their professional/personal interests and the course structure. Fan and Chan (1997) found that the course being too difficult was a significant reason for dropping out.

Globally, there is evidence that courses are often geared towards male needs and interests and lack relevance for women (Lunneborg, 1994). The educational background is also important, as the types of early preparation received and early success or failure can have a strong influence on women's confidence to participate in higher studies (Lunneborg, 1994). Associated with this can be the nature of the tasks and assessment (Parer, 1988), as well as the kind of support that is given for students to interpret, start and continue assignments (Parer, 1988). For example, Fan and Chan (1997) found that 70% of the students who dropped out did so around the time of submission of the first assignment. Batool and Bakker (1997) also found that the highest dropout phase was assignment time, either because they could not submit them or because there was some problem with the feedback or marking whereas, from a more positive point of view, Hipp (1997) described getting favourable assignment results as being a turning point in many women's self-confidence as distance education students.

Hurkamp (1968) has suggested an important theory that it is not so much the contributing factors themselves that affect women's success in their studies, and particularly their decision to drop out, as their attitudes towards and perceptions of these factors. In other words, two students might experience exactly the same conditions, but if they have different attitudes towards the events, the outcomes of their studies might be quite different. These can include attitudes to the course, to personal conditions, to competing commitments and duties, to the instructor and other students, to environmental factors, to prestige of the course, to home and family environments, and to previous education experiences.

While research has supported many of the above arguments, there are still many questions that need to be answered before we are able to move towards enhanced access to education for the majority of Indian women. Although, as has been illustrated, there are some issues already identified in western research that are relevant to women in Asia, there are also many different concerns and perspectives, even within India, that are based on race, class and generalisations about women's role in society (Kanwar, 1995a). In particular, there is a need to learn a great deal more about how distance education can help to overcome some of these problems. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has already instigated initiatives to encourage disadvantaged women to participate in education programmes, for example, by introducing certificate and diploma courses in Women's Education, focusing on such issues as food and nutrition and organising child care (Kanwar, 1995b). But attracting the women to enrol in courses is only part of the challenge. The other part is finding ways to help them to engage effectively with their studies and stay in the course until successful completion. While the IGNOU student record system does not enable easy access to figures about attrition

rates, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that the attrition rate of women students is higher than that of males and that, since the enrolment rate of women is only 22% of the total, it is a significant issue to understand better how to keep and support those who do enrol.

There is clearly sufficient evidence to indicate that at least some of the factors influencing student attrition are within the power of universities to change. Given the importance of student retention for economic and social reasons, and particularly the aforementioned need to support women students, it is important to gain insights about the nature of these factors to enable preventative initiatives to be instigated.

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to investigate the following questions in the context of IGNOU:

- 1) What are the major problems experienced during their studies by adult women distance education students?
- 2) What are the female students' feelings about their circumstances as adult distance education students, and the effects that these circumstances might have had on their studies?
- 3) What factors cause women students to consider dropping out?
- 4) At what stage of the course is the student most at risk of dropping out?
- 5) What suggestions do students have about how IGNOU can better meet the needs of female students and thus increase their chances of completing their courses successfully?

Method

Sample

In order to investigate these questions, it was considered important to interview women who have overcome difficulties to succeed in distance education, and those who have succumbed to the difficulties and discontinued their studies. However, one of the problems that arose was that, due to the nature of distance education, with students continually dropping in and out for various reasons, it is difficult to identify those who fit into the category of 'dropouts'. In an attempt to define this group, a list of names was generated from the records of students who had not completed courses and not submitted assignments or sat for examinations for more than one year. Questionnaires were sent to these former students. However, no replies were received. It is speculated that most of these students had moved away from their former addresses, possibly because of marriage, and could no longer be contacted. Therefore it became necessary to modify the research design to consider instead those women who had been tempted to drop out of their courses at some stage. It was felt that by identifying the problems that these women experienced, it might give at least some insight into the problems that influence women to consider dropping out seriously, even if they do not eventually do so.

A sample of 50 female IGNOU students was identified. These were all women who

were currently living in the Delhi area, although, due to, for example, the need to move around with their husbands' employment, they had not necessarily been in Delhi for the whole duration of their courses.

In an attempt to identify a sample that consisted of women students from a variety of backgrounds, two different sampling techniques were used. First, the Student Affairs Office identified ten students who came from a cross-section of backgrounds and experiences. These students were contacted by telephone and were visited by the interviewer in their homes or offices. The other 40 students were approached randomly in the Student Support Centre of the main campus of IGNOU. These were students who had come to the campus for various reasons, including to register for courses, seek information, or to seek help with a problem of some kind. Because it was necessary for them to visit this centre during business hours, there was the possibility of targeting only those women who were free of other commitments and able to come to the university. However, in fact, almost all had taken time off from their jobs or other commitments for the day in order to make the journey to the campus.

Methodology

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect data about impact upon their studies of the students' family and work responsibilities, practical and financial difficulties, physical and emotional problems, support or lack of it from others, and course-related factors. The design of this questionnaire drew on the instrument developed by Hurkamp (1968), measuring not only the existence of these factors but also the students' attitudes towards them and their effects on the students' study success. In addition to the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed to probe further about the kinds of difficulties the students had experienced during their distance education experiences, particularly those difficulties that caused them to be tempted to give up their courses, and the reasons why they ultimately persisted.

The interviews, which were conducted in English, were tape-recorded and summaries were transcribed. The issues that were explored in the interview were whether the specific problems referred to in the questionnaire were serious enough to cause them to consider giving up the course, why they decided to persist, what if any strategies they employed to help them to overcome the difficulties, and whether there was any way that the University or somebody else could have helped them to overcome their problems.

The ten students who were interviewed in their homes or offices completed the questionnaire in the presence of the interviewer and this was utilised as a basis for semi-structured discussion. Due to time constraints with the other 40, these were asked to complete the questionnaire independently and the discussion was used to probe any points identified as being of particular interest either volunteered by them, or identified by the interviewer from their questionnaires.

Results

Student Background

Table 2 indicates the general profile of the students who completed the questionnaire.

Table 2: General profile

Age	< 20 9 (18%)	21 – 30 25 (50%)	31 – 40 15 (30%)	41 – 50 1 (2%)	
Marital status	Married 23 (46%)	Widowed 2 (4%)	Single 25 (50%)		
Course type	vocational 2 (4%)	professional 38 (76%)	academic 10 (20%)		
Course level	certificate 2 (4%)	diploma 9 (19%)	degree 22 (46%)	higher degree 15 (31%)	
Field of study	science/tech.* 26 (52%)	arts/humanities 2 (4%)	business 10 (20%)	training 5 (10%)	other 7 (14%)
Occupation	housewife 5 (10%)	not working/ retired 1 (2%)	student 19 (40%)	white collar worker 22 (46%)	blue collar worker 1 (2%)
Source of financial support for course	husband 11 (23%)	family/ friends 21 (45%)	University 7 (15%)	self 8 (17%)	

It can be seen from Table 2 that the majority of the students were in the 21-30 or 31-40 age groups. There was an even distribution of married and single students. They were mostly undertaking professional courses at degree or higher degree levels, with more than half studying in the science/technology area, and the majority of this latter group being enrolled in computing courses. Business courses, particularly MBA, were also very common. The majority were employed and considered themselves to be white-collar workers (46%). There was also quite a large proportion of the sample (40%) made up of full-time students in conventional colleges who were studying related courses by distance at the same time. These were mostly young women in the 21-30 age group who were keen to become well qualified to be competitive in their future careers. More than half of the sample were supported financially in their studies by family, usually parents (45%) or husband (23%). Comments during the interviews indicated just how important the support of others was to these students. For example, one indicated that her teenage children co-operated with the changes that took her attentions away from them, and even encouraged her to study. Those who were single and still living with their parents particularly mentioned that their fathers had always emphasised the value of education. Another said that her husband was supportive and took on the extra burden of helping in the home, because they had both decided that if she were to do the course she should have every opportunity to do it properly. Several also mentioned that their husbands attempted to support them by helping with the content of the course materials although, in cases where the husband did not have the relevant expertise, it was still necessary for them to seek help from others outside the home.

More were likely to attribute difficulties or failure to lack of effort (49%) than to lack of ability (2%) or factors beyond their control such as bad teaching or bad luck (18%), although 31% mentioned that it was often 'something else', such as a combination of their own lack of time to put in maximum effort and in some cases bad organisation either by themselves or by the study centre. Most of the help seeking was related to problems with understanding course material and completing assignments (66%). While 37% of the students approached tutors or counsellors for help, 57% preferred or found it easier to approach a friend or family member, another student, or a work colleague.

Sixty-four per cent formed study groups with other students, mostly just before a test or assignment was due (50%). While 50% said that their preference would be to study with others for at least some of the time, 44% indicated that they in fact prefer to study alone. Nevertheless, 81% indicated that friendships with other students would probably or very likely help their studies. While 59% said that their involvement with a group helped the understanding of their academic work, 22% also felt it helped them to gain support to cope with the personal difficulties associated with their studies. It was commonly mentioned during the interviews that it is important to have a constant person at the university who can be contacted when problems arise, as when they sought help in the study centres it frequently involved running from person to person and room to room to find information.

Factors that Influenced Students to Consider Dropping Out

Interestingly, there was an exact division between those students who had seriously considered dropping out of their courses at some stage and those who had never considered dropping out. As can be seen from Table 3, the most critical time for 18% of the former group was within the first few weeks, with just after receiving the results of the first assignment being the most critical for 14% and just before the examination for 12%. When interviewed, several students commented on the disillusionment of getting assignment marks that were lower than they had hoped for:

When I first got my assignment results they were not up to the mark. I was ready to drop out but my husband insisted. He explained that the problem was not knowing the expected standard and encouraged me to continue. This encouragement not to give up at the critical times was an important factor for many students.

Table 3: Times when dropping out was considered

Within the first few weeks	9 (18%)
Just before the first assignment was due	2 (4%)
Just after receiving the results of the first assignment	7 (14%)
In the middle of the semester	1 (2%)
Just before the exam	6 (12%)
Did not consider dropping out at all	25 (50%)

The interviews revealed some interesting insights about why these students were tempted to drop out. The most commonly mentioned reason was personal problems or family problems, including difficulties with caring for young children. One student had in fact dropped out of her course for two years because of family commitments. On the other hand, a student who was coping with a lot of personal problems at the time of her studying said that the studying also gave her a focus that helped her to overcome these problems.

Also commonly-mentioned was the temptation to drop out because of difficulties with getting course materials in time to complete assignments or examinations, particularly for those students who had to take leave from work to go to the regional centre or main campus to collect these materials themselves as they were not able to get them on time

any other way. Another reason was if they felt that they did not have sufficient background to enable them to understand the course materials. Two of the students who mentioned this problem indicated that they had particular problems with the mathematics components of their courses and that it would have been helpful if they had been able to get more coaching from the university. Others indicated that their continuation depended from semester to semester on their examination results, having decided that if they failed any exam they would not continue.

Comparisons Between Students who Considered Dropping Out and those who did Not

Chi-square tests were used to examine differences in the proportions of students who had seriously considered dropping out and those who had not. There were no statistically significant differences on any item. In other words, there were no clearly significant differences between the experiences and feelings of the 25 students who had been tempted to drop out and the 25 who had not considered doing so. However, closer examination indicates that there were some items on which the modes were different for the two groups and these items have been reported here in Table 4. Some of these differences were not very great. For example, on the question about their feelings about the quality of personal preparation for the course, the former group gave a modal response of 'reasonably prepared' and the latter group one of 'well prepared'. However, the patterns on some of the items are worth considering as they might give some insight into the experiences that caused the women in the latter group to consider dropping out.

Table 4: Items on which modes were different for students who considered dropping out and students who did not

<i>Item</i>	<i>Modal response for students who did not consider dropping out</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Modal response for students who considered dropping out</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Changes in personal or work circumstances	Yes, and it affected my studies somewhat	10 (40%)	No, this did not happen	8 (32%)
Feelings about changes in living routines caused by studies	Some minor adjustments to be made but everything worked out OK	16 (64%)	Definitely some changes and, I felt, some small sacrifices	9(36%)
Feelings about missing other activities in order to study	I missed them, but I guess it was worth it.	13 (52%)	Didn't feel that I missed them a great deal.	10 (40%)
Convenience of the days and times of face-to-face sessions	They were reasonably suitable for me as long as I made a few special arrangements	14 (56%)	They fitted in well with my schedule and other commitments.	11 (44%)
Feelings about quality of personal preparation for course	Reasonably prepared	11 (44%)	Well prepared	16 (64%)
Employment considerations	Employed and encouraged by employer to take course	13 (52%)	Not employed	12 (48%)

Contd...

Length of time interested in course subject matter	0-2 years	12 (48%)	I have always been interested as far back as I can remember	8 (32%)
Feelings about course workload	The workload was reasonable and I coped well	14 (56%)	The workload was heavy but I managed to cope	12 (48%)
Accomplishment of goals	Accomplished personal goals	13 (52%)	Accomplished one or two personal goals but not all	11 (44%)
Access to equipment needed for course	Most of the time had no problems accessing or using equipment [8]	8 (32%)	Was able to use all the equipment I needed-no problems	8 (32%)
Causes of conflicts with studies	Work commitments	7 (28%)	Duties in the home	10 (40%)
Previous schooling	College	12 (48%)	Graduate	15 (60%)
Years since last formal education experience	Presently attending school or college	8 (32%)	1-3 years	9 (36%)
	More than 10 years	8 (32%)		

On the item concerned with changes in personal or work circumstances, the mode for those students who had not considered dropping out was clearly that it affected their studies somewhat, whereas for the group who considered dropping out the spread was much more even. While eight students (32%) of this group said that there had been no changes in circumstances, seven said that changes occurred which did affect their studies a great deal and seven that changes occurred but they did not affect their studies.

Regarding changes that had to be made to their living circumstances to accommodate their studies, the modal response for those who did not consider dropping out was that some minor adjustments had to be made but everything worked out OK (64%). However, for those who had considered dropping out, there were more who felt that the changes involved some small sacrifices (36%). About the need to make sacrifices, the following comment was typical:

I sometimes felt irritable from the tension of doing it, even though I knew I had to do it... but have to sacrifice for one year and that's just it — it was a sacrifice while going through but worth it now. Looking back, I am glad to have done it.

Whereas, for the students who did not consider dropping out, the modal response was that they missed other activities but supposed it was worth it (50%), those who had considered dropping out indicated that they did not feel they had missed other activities a great deal (40%). Similarly, the modal response for those who had considered dropping out to the item about convenience of the days and times of face-to-face sessions was more positive, with 44% saying they fitted in well with their schedules and other commitments. On the other hand, the mode of the group who had not considered dropping out implied that they had needed to make some special arrangements (56%).

Whereas 52% of those who did not consider dropping out indicated that they were employed and encouraged by their employers to study, 48% of those who did consider quitting were not employed. Of the ladies who did consider dropping out, 7 of those who were employed said they had encouragement from their employers and 6 said they did not.

The modal lengths of time for which the two groups had been interested in the subject matter of their courses were different. Those who had not considered dropping out mostly had a new interest in the topic (48% had been interested for less than two years), whereas those who had considered dropping out indicated a more long-term interest (32% had been interested as far back as they could remember). However, this latter group had a more even spread, with 7 students also saying that their interest in the subject was new (28%).

There was some difference in the reactions of the two groups to their ability to cope with the course workload. The mode response of the group that did not consider dropping out was clearly that the workload was reasonable and they coped quite well (56%). For those who had been tempted to drop out, the spread was more even. The most popular response (48%) was that the load was heavy but they managed to cope, although 11 students (44%) found the workload to be reasonable to cope with.

The most frequent cause of conflict with studies for those who considered dropping out was duties in the home (40%). Amongst the group who did not think of quitting, work commitments were rated by slightly more (28%) but closely followed by home duties and lack of proper planning (6 students, or 24%, for each), and often a combination of these rather than any one alone. It must be remembered here, however, that this difference may be explained by the fact that slightly more of the students in the latter group were employed than in the former, and hence had more commitments and responsibilities to be balanced in their lives.

Whereas the modal level of previous education for the group who did not consider dropping out was college level (48%), for the group who did consider giving up it was graduate level (60%). With respect to the number of years since their last formal education experience, the majority of those who did not consider dropping out were divided between those who were still attending school or college and those who had been away from formal schooling for more than 10 years (32% each), whereas the group that considered dropping out had been away from formal education between one and three years (36%).

Hearsay About Why Women Drop Out

The students who were interviewed were asked if they knew any classmates who had dropped out of the courses and, if so, what their reasons were. The reasons given included lack of support by employers, lack of appropriate assistance with the course content, of lack of a real need to complete the course or difficulties associated with going to the study centre. For example, two students said that some of their female classmates had dropped out because their employers would not give them any support, including time to attend exams, and so they had to make a choice between the study and the job. Because they needed the job, that had to take priority. Lack of appropriate help with course content was another problem cited by the students interviewed for their classmates having dropped out. For example, they could not find anybody to help them with the content of the course materials outside set class times, and the classes were not scheduled according to the students' other commitments. Two students suggested that since there are so many people it is sometimes difficult for the university to see students

as individuals and that this affected some of the women in their classes who were looking for help at exactly the time when they needed it. When they were unable to find this help and were sent from one place to another, they decided it was easier to just give up. Several students also mentioned that there were some cultural and social difficulties associated with some of their classmates dropping out. For example, one mentioned that in a place like Delhi it is difficult for safety reasons for a woman to go out alone in the evenings, especially if she has to use public transport or even if she is using her own car. Two others mentioned classmates who had given up because they married and went to live with their parents-in-law who did not support them studying. Linked to this is the lack of immediate goal - that is, there were several cases reported of women who gave up because they did not have an immediate need for the qualification for employment or for other direct benefits. One student mentioned that the women in her class who did not clear the first exam usually did not make a second attempt because they felt that if they did badly there was no reason to continue.

Discussion and Implications

This paper focused on the problems experienced by a group of 50 female distance education students at IGNOU, with a view to identifying ways in which distance education programmes can be made more sympathetic to the needs of women students, and particularly to gain some insight about how they can be encouraged to persist with their studies at the times when they are most likely to be tempted to drop out. It must be emphasised that this study focused on only one group of women students, that is those who were mostly urban residents and from relatively privileged classes. To give a balanced picture of the problems of female IGNOU students it is also important to collect data from a cross-section of women students from rural areas and less privileged groups. Nevertheless, the cross-section considered in this study is an important subgroup of the IGNOU student population and therefore it is useful to have collected data that focus on addressing their needs.

From the results presented in this paper, several issues have arisen that are worthy of further discussion.

Cultural Expectations

While it was suggested by earlier writers such as Kanwar (1995a) that cultural expectations can inhibit Indian women's access to education, the results of this study presented some encouraging information. At least for these mostly urban women, while there still exist cultural expectations about women's roles and duties, there also exists considerable support from fathers, husbands and other family members to gain educational qualifications that can lead to upward economic and social mobility. As suggested by Brunner (1991), Lunneborg (1994) and Burnham (1998), support from significant others is a major issue for these women and several reported that it was either a husband, another family member or a particular IGNOU staff member whose encouragement convinced them not to give up. Often, particularly in the case of husband support, there was joint incentive, such as economic reasons, that led to advantages for the husband as well as the wife for having her succeed in her studies. This is a particularly

significant issue since, as Kanwar (1995a) has suggested, there are many women in India who do not receive any support from their parents, husbands or, after marriage, parents-in-law, to study. It seems that the women interviewed in this project were not excessively handicapped by the cultural expectations for them to assume responsibility for duties in the home or to the family — if they really wanted to achieve their goal of completing the course then they would find a way. This implies that fathers, husbands and other family members who are convinced of the value of the females studying, not only for themselves but also for the whole family, may be a powerful buffer that helps to keep women on track with their studies. This strongly emphasises the importance of mounting public awareness campaigns that provide incentives not only to the women themselves but also to their significant family members and clearly spell out what the advantages are to the whole family of having the woman study.

Attribution and Locus of Control

The findings of this study do not necessarily concur with those of Cooke et al. (1995) that women are more likely to attribute difficulties or failure to factors beyond their control. In fact, in this particular group of women it was more likely that they would attribute their difficulties to lack of effort or a combination of internal factors such as their own lack of effort and external factors such as organisational problems caused by tutors or study centres,

Help-seeking and Personal Contacts

The findings of this study did not concur with the suggestion made by Fan and Chan (1997) that there was a positive link between perseverance and attendance at face-to-face sessions. In fact, some of the most persevering women in this study were those who experienced circumstances of physical or geographical isolation or lack of adequate face-to-face provisions. Furthermore, it emerged from this study that some of the most persistent women were those who actually preferred not to go to any face-to-face sessions.

While the outcomes of this study do reflect the suggestion made by Hipp (1997), that not all women want interaction and that some prefer to work alone with the materials, there is also evidence to suggest that the majority, even those who prefer to be self-contained within the home for their studies, indicated that there would be some value in interacting with other students or in being able to interact more effectively with university personnel at the times when this interaction is necessary. This is consistent with the findings of Kirkup and von Prummer (1997) that women have different needs than men, such as more restrictions on their time and mobility, and are therefore more suited to studying in their domestic environment.

This implies the need for the university to explore alternative ways of facilitating this kind of interaction, for example by utilising telephone, fax and email for these purposes. In particular, the women's responses indicated clearly that it is very important for them to have a contact person who can be reached easily and at convenient times to them, by telephone and/or email

Academic Adjustment

There is no evidence to support the contention of writers such as Chyung et al. (1998) that dissatisfaction with the course was a reason for dropping out. Many of the students interviewed in this study expressed dissatisfaction with some or all aspects of their courses but, as the course was a means to an end rather than the end itself, they persisted in spite of these dissatisfactions. Dissatisfaction with the course itself was not cited as a reason for any of the students who considered dropping out.

Only one student had failed to complete a module and hence to date failed to complete her course because the content of the module was too difficult and she did not have sufficient educational background in this subject, this being the reason given by Fan and Chan (1997) for students dropping out. However, she did not consider herself to have 'dropped out' of the module, but rather to have put it on hold until her personal circumstances allowed her to go out and seek appropriate help.

The most common time for 36% of those who had considered dropping out at some stage was either just before the first assignment or, more commonly, after they had received an assignment result and found that it was lower than they had expected it to be. This is consistent with the suggestion of Batool and Bakker (1997) that the highest dropout phase was assignment time, either because the students could not submit them or because there was some problem with the feedback or marking, suggesting that women need to be given positive and constructive feedback to ensure that confidence is enhanced rather than eroded. Of course, the majority of women in this group had relatively positive experiences, which might have helped them to stay with the courses, and more needs to be explored with respect to women who do not have such experiences of positive feedback.

Motivation

The majority of the students in this group was clearly very goal-directed and therefore determined to succeed no matter what the obstacles. As one student said :

Motivation is the only thing that counts. If you are strongly motivated then you make the sacrifices and just do it.

In contrast to the women who said they had considered giving up at some stage but did not because of their determination to reach their goals, it was of interest to note that one of the 'hearsay' reasons for a number of female classmates giving up was that they were forced to make a choice between their employment and their studies and, since they did not need the qualification to benefit their employment, chose to quit their studies. In other words, while the women with direct goals and incentives for completing the course persevered even if they felt like giving up, those without the same direct incentives found it easier to make the decision to give up.

To further lend weight to this implication is the indication that slightly more of the group who were tempted to give up had higher previous academic qualifications, for example already having attained graduate level. This may imply that the students who were not tempted to drop out may have had a greater need to complete the course because they did not already have university education, whereas those who did

contemplate dropping out were more inclined to do so because they already had a degree.

Encouragement and support from employers seems to be more of a uniform occurrence amongst those students who had never considered dropping out, whereas amongst those who had been tempted, there were slightly more who were not encouraged by their employers. Furthermore, there was some hearsay about students who dropped out because of opposition from their employers. This adds another dimension to the suggestion that external goals such as incentives provided by employers might be a critical factor in encouraging women to persist with their studies.

Practical and Financial Difficulties

Contrary to what was suggested by Kanwar (1995a), the fact that a large percentage of the women in this study were financially dependent upon the support of family or husbands to undertake their studies does not seem to have been detrimental to their participation. Of course, further research needs to be done amongst less privileged women before any generalisations can be made about this. While the women did not perceive financial difficulties to be too serious a problem, there was a wide range of practical difficulties, mostly to do with getting quality assistance either from face-to-face sessions about course-work problems or from university personnel about administrative problems. Nevertheless, the general attitude seemed to be one of resigned acceptance of these difficulties and the need to 'just get on with it' in the best way that they could.

Living Routines

Although 52% had three or more people living in the household during their studies, most of the women interviewed seem to have been able to adjust their living routines as necessary and their desire to succeed was greater than any conflicts felt because of these adjustments. It is important, however, to note again the number of students who indicated that it was very important for them to be able, if necessary, to carry out all of their study-related and administration-related and help-seeking transactions without having to leave their homes.

There was a hint that those who had never considered dropping out had more of a feeling that they were sacrificing other activities, even though in the long-term they thought this was worth it, whereas those who had been tempted to drop out did not seem to have this same sense of sacrifice.

Students' Suggestions

During the interviews, the students were asked to suggest ways in which they thought that they could have been helped or supported more by the university during their studies. Their suggestions included:

- *offer more classes on weekends,*
- *have smaller tutorials, for example 6-10 students with one tutor,*

- *place more emphasis on helping women to study without having to leave home,*
- *make more use of fax and email for getting information and assistance,*
- *assign students to groups and then inform them to have a common get-together,*
- *assign each student a person who can be contacted easily and directly for help with administrative problems or to help them to get appropriate assistance with course-related problems,*
- *offer more counselling support, for example somebody to whom we can speak out our problems and have some psyching-up... I got this from good friends but some formal support from the university would have been very helpful,*
- *some optional courses so that a student will not be held back from completing a degree by not being able to complete one subject with which she might have a 'block',*
- *offer some seminars about strategies for coping with the first few weeks of being a new distance education student.*

Recommendations and Practical Implications

As mentioned earlier, any attempt to make generalisations from the results of study must be treated with caution due to the fact that the sample was restricted to women from just one area and essentially one socio-economic group. However, several implications for IGNOU in particular and distance education in general may be proposed. These include:

- the need to target whole families to recognise the value of education and how distance education can help women to help the whole family,
- the importance of having a contact person, for example an ongoing counsellor who is assigned to the student for the whole course, and who can be contacted easily when the student has academic, administrative or personal problems,
- the importance of goal-directedness as a factor in these students' perseverance. It may be that course counselling could help students to identify goals that are important to them and then to help them to select courses that will address these goals (i.e. a process that the goal-directed ones seem to go through by themselves).
- the need for women students to have the option of being able to do everything related to their courses from their homes, including help-seeking for academic, administrative and if necessary personal problems, and making contact with other students, without having to leave home.

To find out more about how these suggestions might impact upon women's experiences in distance education, several issues warrant further research investigation.

- There is a need to identify experiences and problems of the women in this study compared to those of women in other groups, for example, rural women or those in low socio-economic groups.
- It is important to find a way to access those students who have dropped out, and to

get the real story about why they did so, in order to make comparisons between this group and the ones who kept going despite being tempted to dropout.

- At this stage no comparisons have been made to the problems experienced by male distance education students. While the justification for this lack of comparison is that there is an abundance of previous literature to indicate that men and women do have different needs, it would still be valuable to undertake some comparative studies in order to get a comprehensive picture.
- There is a need for further investigations of perseverance, particularly to compare effective and ineffective perseverance. For example, there may well be some women who persevere with a particular course when what they should be doing is giving up or changing to a more suitable course.
- The issue of goal directedness warrants further exploration. For example, there could be value in carrying out studies that measure the effects of goal-direction as a predictor of course persistence.

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Dr. Margaret Taplin is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Research in Distance & Adult Learning at The Open University of Hong Kong. She has a background in mathematics education and one of her long-held research interest has been in the area of encouraging female students' participation in mathematics. She is currently co-investigator of a five-country project investigating access to distance education by Asian women. *Correspondence:* Centre for Research in Distance & Adult Learning, The Open University of Hong Kong, 30 Good Shepherd St., Homantin, Kowloon, Hong Kong. Fax: (852) 2715 9042. Email: mtaplin@ouhk.edu.hk