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# EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: SIGNIFICANCE AND GAPS IDENTIFIED FROM THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Involvement in academic and extracurricular activities (ECA) has facilitated students to learn and thrive during their university period. The present study investigated the learner perceived impact of engagement of ECAs for academic success, skill development, and wellbeing in an open and distance learning environment. The study cohort was 435 BSc undergraduates of the Open University of Sri Lanka. A self-administered questionnaire was administered online to obtain demographic and learners' perceptions of ECAs. The responses were analyzed using SPSS version 23. Results revealed that 72.9% of the respondents were female, 41.2% of the respondents aged 29–39 years, 63% were unemployed and 65% engaged in university clubs as their ECAs. Younger students believed ECA leads to a neglected personal life ( $p=0.01$ ). In general, ECA has helped male students to reduce social isolation*

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( $p=0.01$ ), improve future career prospect ( $p<0.05$ ), improve intellectual capacity ( $p=0.01$ ), and explore and nurture talents overall ( $p=0.03$ ). The study level and the time they spent on ECA had no significant impact on their academic performances ( $p>0.05$ ). However, students utilizing more study hours considered ECA has reduced their time for academic and career activities ( $p=0.01$ ). The present study highlights the importance of student engagement in ECAs for their personal development and student retention in an ODL system.

## KEYWORDS

*Academic, Extracurricular activities, Open and Distance learning, Skills, Sri Lanka*

## INTRODUCTION

University life is perceived as the most exciting phase of a student's life because of the opportunities for personal development, new experiences, and knowledge acquisition. The prime function of universities is to provide a high-quality education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels serving for the needs of a dynamic society. However, university education goes beyond acquiring knowledge where students will develop a set of transferable and practical skills essential to be successful in professional pursuits (Stuart *et al.*, 2011).

Involvement in extracurricular activities (ECA) facilitates the social competence, confidence, self-esteem, and self-awareness of students (Lumley *et al.*, 2015). ECAs cover a wide range of complementary activities such as sports, arts, music, voluntary projects, university clubs, organizations, social services, and community services (Howard & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009). Moreover, they can be broadly categorized into physical activities (sports), educational activities (university club, journalism), and social activities (voluntary projects) (Ahmad *et al.*, 2015). Universities across the globe have implemented interventions to promote students' engagement in ECA during the university period. Generally, ECAs are introduced and promoted among the freshers who have relatively more time and interest (Vandell *et al.*, 2015). Also, some universities provide a wide range of ECAs addressing the different interests of students while certain universities have included ECAs in their curricula as mandatory or optional components to promote student engagement (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Engagement in ECAs also enables students to appreciate human diversity, as well as persistence and satisfaction (Reason *et al.*, 2006). Evidence indicates participation in ECAs not only facilitates skill development, but also contributes to academic success such as higher grades, better exam scores, and positive educational experiences among students (Eccles *et al.*, 2003). Most importantly, participation in ECAs appears to minimize dropout rates (Mahoney, 2000) since it promotes associations with peers (Eccles and Templeton, 2002). Moreover, students who engage in extracurricular

activities have comparative advantages in employability (Stuart *et al.*, 2011). However, other research has produced contradicting results regarding the relationship between extracurricular activity participation and academic performance. Brint and Cantwell (2010) reported that there was a modest negative effect on the time spent on extracurricular student clubs with academic conscientiousness and higher grades. Similarly, another study revealed that students who regularly participated in ECAs had a lower overall GPA (Yin & Lei, 2007). Hence, more empirical evidence is required for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of ECAs on academic progression and personal development. Particularly, evidence from different geographical locations would strengthen the global policymakers to reform education policies. Conventional universities in Sri Lanka offer diverse extracurricular activities ranging from sports, cultural activities, societies, clubs, and other volunteering projects administrated by the university or student organizations. Several studies conducted in different settings in Sri Lanka reiterated that engagement in extracurricular activities has a competitive advantage in the job market (Kumarasinghe & Udeshika, 2015) and increases academic performance (Ranasinghe *et al.*, 2017). However, limited studies have evaluated the role of ECAs in the distance learning setting where physical interaction is minimal.

In Sri Lanka, the Open University is a pioneer state University that follows the open and distance learning (ODL) mode. OUSL was established in 1978 under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 and administrated by the University Grants Commission. The Open University caters for higher education opportunities for more than 40,000 students studying at 9 Regional Centers and 18 Study Centers around the country (Jayasinghe *et al.*, 2018). With significant educational advancements in recent years, ODL mode has been established as a fundamental component of higher education. The ODL system is now at the forefront of educational practice where the barriers to education such as age, finance, place, pace, and prior qualifications can be removed, and anyone can access education (UNESCO, 2001). ODL provides a flexible learning environment for students, allowing learners to learn independently of time and place (Jayasinghe *et al.*, 2018). Despite these advantages, the institutes using ODL mode face two unique challenges; a higher student dropout rate and low employability skills of graduates (Kurupparachchi & Karunanayake, 2017, Jayasinghe *et al.*, 2022). The higher dropout rates in the ODL system could be mainly attributed to the physical isolation of learners due to the physical and temporal separation of instructor and student and lack of motivation (Kurupparachchi & Karunanayake, 2017). Hence, it is important to understand the factors influencing the dropouts and to develop innovative interventions to address these problems. Encouraging students to participate in extracurricular activities could be a potential intervention to break the isolation among distance learners and address the issue of dropping out.

Simultaneously, it will develop an array of soft skills in students. However, the notional study hours of the students must be well balanced to maintain academic standards while improving the soft skills (Jayasinghe et al., 2022). Several years ago, the typical OUSL students were middle-aged adults who were employed. Quite recently, there has been a change in the dynamics of the OUSL student cohort where many younger, full-time students join the OUSL (Jayasinghe *et al.*, 2018). Further, already employed students wish to change their career prospects after graduation (Jayasinghe *et al.*, 2022). Hence, the skill development required to be successful in the workplace must be addressed during the university period. This can be easily achieved by encouraging students to engage in ECAs, which would facilitate essential employability skills like leadership, self-assertiveness, decision-making, problem-solving, and teamwork (Griffiths *et al.*, 2017).

The OUSL students are already provided with numerous opportunities for ECAs such as sports facilities, student-staff interactive societies, student clubs, cultural activities, etc. However, thus far none of the studies have quantified the students' participation, preference, and their perception of engaging in ECA at OUSL. Hence, the present study employed a cohort of BSc undergraduates currently registered at the OUSL to identify the perception of extracurricular activities and their perceived impact on academic performance and skill development by engaging in extracurricular activities. It is anticipated the result of this study will pave the way to propose novel interventions in terms of ECAs to improve students' academic success, retention, career readiness, and overall well-being of the OUSL student community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Extracurricular activities (ECAs) are defined as activities that do not require classroom activities or parts of the curriculum that result in a grade or academic credits (Pascarella *et al.*, 2005). In this regard, one essential aspect of ECA is its optional nature, which allows students to participate in it following their free will (Han & Kwon, 2018). ECA encompasses both academic and extracurricular activities like reading clubs, language learning groups for foreign languages, mountaineering, sports, dancing, and so forth. Participation in ECA has many advantages ranging from cognitive to soft skills development. It trains students in cognitive complexity such as knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, reflective learning, and intellectual flexibility (Han & Kwon, 2018). It also facilitates both interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies such as self-confidence, self-awareness, and peer interaction. Some practical competencies like decision-making and vocational preparation also can be enhanced through the ECAs. Further, ECA also enhances a student's persistence and educational attainment which are employability skills. Most importantly the ECA inculcates humanitarianism qualities

(Kuh *et al.*, 1994). De Luca *et al.* (2016) using a large group of students revealed that involvement in extracurricular activities (ECAs) was positively correlated with improved academic standing and significantly contributed to the lowering of suicide among students. However, opposite observations have been reported by some other studies. According to Brint and Cantwell (2010), there was a slight inverse relationship between academic conscientiousness and higher grades, and the amount of time spent in extracurricular student groups. According to Yin and Lei's (2007) study, students who participated in extracurricular activities on a regular basis had a lower overall GPA than their non-participating peers. However, further research from various global contexts is needed to fully comprehend how ECAs affect academic advancement and personal growth. To comprehend the connection between extracurricular activities and academic success, the different pedagogical models have to be revisited, and it will help educators design interventions to enrich the effective learning process. Three models; *Zero-Sum Model*, *Development Model*, and *Threshold Models* proposed by Seow and Pan (2014) explain how extracurricular activity participation affects students' academic performance. On the other hand, Biggs' Presage–Process–Product model that explains deep learning highlighted that deep learning can be enhanced by confidence building up by engaging in extracurricular activities (Chan, 2016).

According to the Seow and Pan (2014) paradigm, engagement in extracurricular activities has social and non-academic benefits that have a favorable impact on academic performance. The non-academic benefits of extracurricular activity involve the development of a variety of skills that facilitate academic success, including time management, personal organization, and teamwork. The first model proposed by Seow and Pan, the *Zero-Sum model*, sees the resources a student utilizes for academic study such as time, engagement, cognitive ability, and so forth—as restricted and finite resources (Seow & Pan, 2014). According to this model, students who invest time or resources in extracurricular activities are not allocating their resources as efficiently as they may be in terms of their academic performance. In other words, time spent on extracurricular activities comes at the expense of studying for exams (Seow and Pan, 2014). The second model, *Developmental Model* suggests that extra-curricular activities have an indirect effect on academic performance because of the non-academic and social benefits of participation. In this model, many suggest that participants develop a wide range of competencies that support academic achievement such as time management, personal organization, and teamwork like non-academic effects. The *Threshold model* is the third *Theoretical Model* explained by Seow and Pan in 2014. It builds upon the development framework, arguing that ECA benefit academic performance to a certain extent, but excessive participation in ECA can be harmful to academic achievement if it takes

up too much time. As this theory explains, the threshold of any activity is working hours which could significantly affect the academic performances of OUSL students in an ODL setting. Presage–Process–Product Model 3P model was proposed by Biggs and Moore in 1993 which explains the deep learning of students (Biggs, 1996). A correlation between Biggs’ Presage–Process–Product model and extra-curricular activities was validated by Chan, 2016 using the Revised Two-Factor Study Process Questionnaire with 131 full-time students. The findings show a favorable correlation between academic results and a deep approach. Students are more likely to employ the deep approach if they participate actively in ECA.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

1. To investigate the influence of age, gender, year of the degree, and employability of engaging in ECAs of the BSc undergraduates of the OUSL
2. To investigate the type of ECAs and the factors that have influenced the choice of ECAs engaged by the BSc undergraduates of the OUSL
3. To investigate the weekly engagement in studies and extracurricular activities of the BSc undergraduates of the OUSL
4. To explore the perception of the BSc undergraduates of the OUSL on the effect of engagement in extracurricular activities on academic success, skill development, social isolation, and overall well-being
5. To investigate the correlations between selected demographic characters and learner perceived impact on academic success, skill development, social isolation, and overall well-being of BSc undergraduate students of OUSL.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

1. What are the students’ demographic factors influencing the choice of ECAs and their engagement?
2. What is the weekly engagement of students for studies and ECAs?
3. What are the perceptions of students on engaging in ECAs and its effect on academic success, skill development, social isolation, and well-being?
4. What are the relationships between students' demographic characteristics and their perceptions of engagement in ECAs?

### **RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

1. There is an impact of age on engagement in extracurricular activities.
2. There is an impact of gender on engagement in extracurricular activities.
3. There is an impact on the year of study (level of the degree) on the engagement in extracurricular activities.
4. There is a positive relationship between the employability of students and their engagement in extracurricular and academic success.

5. There is a positive relationship between the study hours per week and academic success.
6. There is a positive relationship between the hours spent on ECAs per week and academic success

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This present study was a cross-sectional study employed for a cohort of 435 BSc undergraduates of the Faculty of Natural Sciences to obtain information about the ECAs that they engage in and how it has impacted their academic and career development. Among the total student population at the Faculty of Natural Sciences, the target population was selected based on a course that has the largest number of student registrations. This student population was able to address the research questions as they spent ample time in the OUSL.

### **Survey Instrument**

A self-administered detailed structured questionnaire was developed in English and content validation was done by subject experts at the Open University of Sri Lanka and the reliability was tested. The questionnaire's internal consistency was assessed to determine its reliability, yielding Cronbach's alpha of 0.69. Although slightly below the conventional threshold of 0.70 for "good" reliability, a value of 0.69 is considered acceptable and indicates that the questionnaire is sufficiently reliable. The questionnaire consisted of both open and closed-ended questions, and it was structured into four sections of questions that covered 1) demographic characteristics, 2) educational background, 3) information about extracurricular activities, 4) learner perceived impact in extracurricular activity participation on academic performance, skill development, and well-being. Section 4 consisted of responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree".

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected using an online self-administered structured questionnaire as a Google form sent via email and WhatsApp messages. The informed consent was obtained from the respondent prior to recruitment. This study was conducted from April to June 2024.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data was coded and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which was transferred into SPSS version 23, SPSS Inc. Chicago. Descriptive data like frequencies, percentages, and mean were calculated. Close ended- Likert scale questions were provided with a score of 1-5, and correlation between predictor variables of the study were measured using either Kruskal Wallis or Independent t-

tests based on the normality of the data. A p value <0.05 was considered significant.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

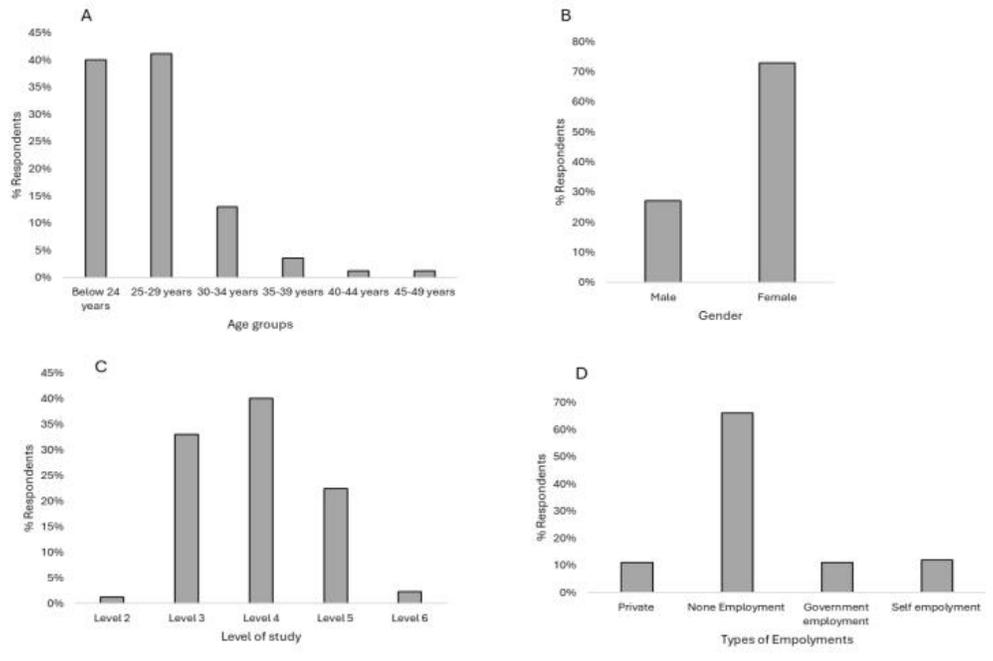
**Response rate**

The response rate was 22.0% where the questionnaire was distributed among 435 students and out of which only 97 students responded.

**Participant demographics**

Among the total respondents, 72.9% were female while 27.1% were male (Figure 1A). Most of the respondents belonged to the age category of 29–39 (41.2%). Of the respondents, 40.0% were below 40 years of age (Figure 1B). The rest of the age categories; 30-34 years, 35-39 years, and 40-44 years, represented 12.9%, 3.5%, and 1.2%, respectively. Majority of the respondents were studying at level 4 (40.0%) while 32.9%, 22.4%, and 2.4% represented participants from levels 3, 5, and 6 of the BSc degree programme, respectively. Moreover, 1.2% of respondents represented level 2 (Foundation program) of the Faculty of Natural Sciences (Figure 1C). Most of the respondents were not employed (63%) while around 10% of the respondents were either working for the government or private sector or self-employed (Figure 1D).

**Figure 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents. A) Age categories, B) Gender, C) Level of Education at OUSL, D) Employability**

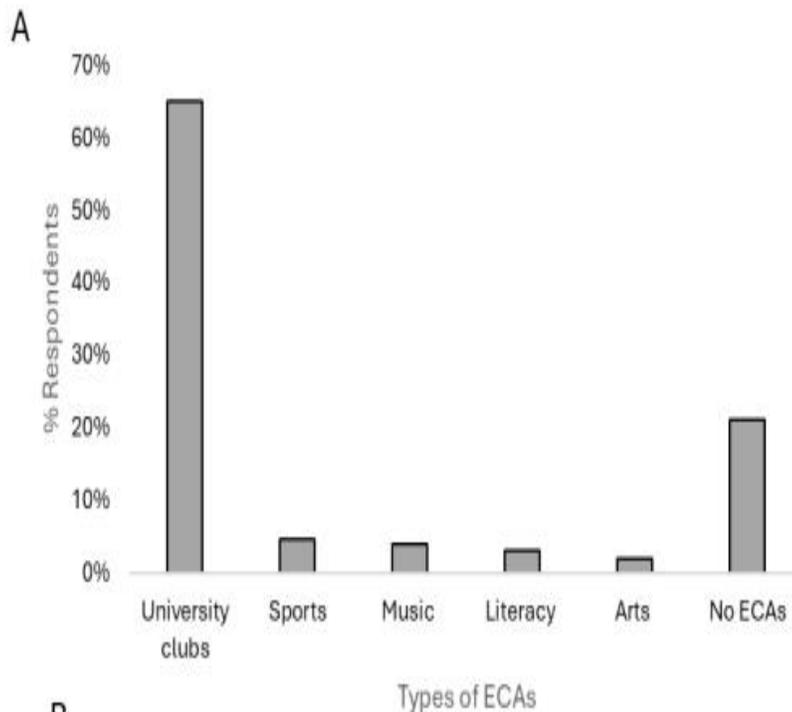


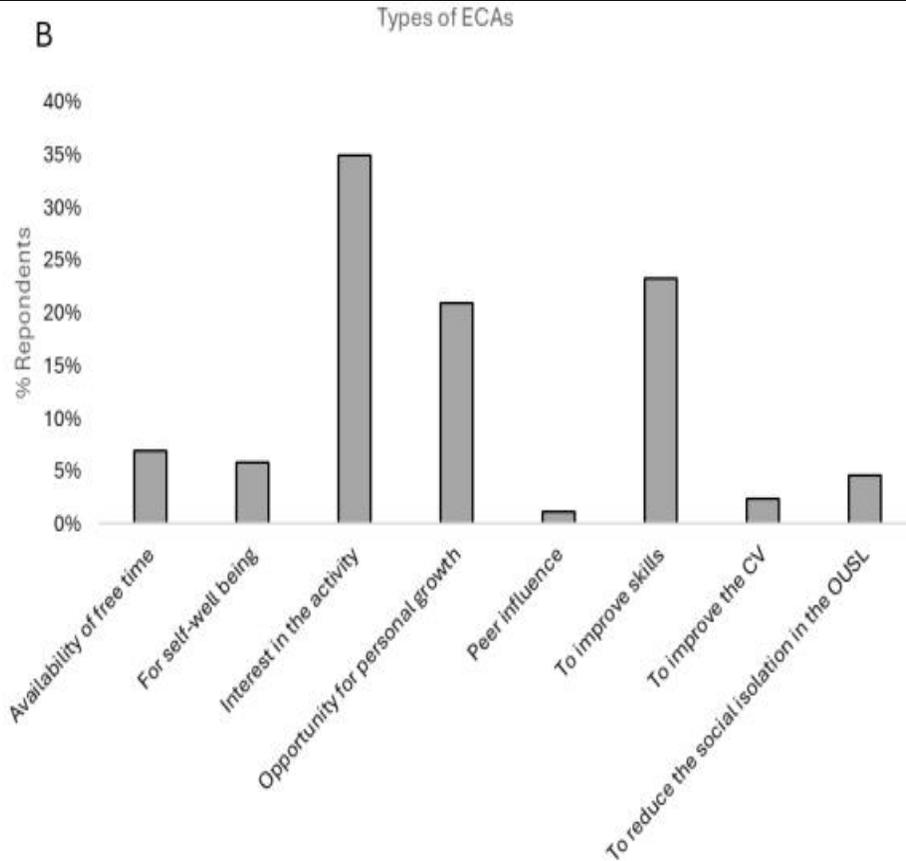
**Type of ECAs engaged by the students and the influence of the engagement in ECAs**

According to Figure 2A, 65% of respondents engage in university club/society activities while around 5% of students engage in sports as ECAs. Around 4% of respondents engage in music, while 3% engage in literacy as their ECAs. However, 21% of respondents have not engaged in any ECAs. Most respondents (35%) engaged in ECAs based on their interest.

Around 21% and 23% of respondents believed that engaging in ECAs provides an opportunity for personal growth and improving skills, respectively. Availability of free time has been a major motivation factor for 7% of respondents to engage in ECAs, while 5% of respondents believed ECAs are helpful for them to reduce social isolation in the open and distance learning environment. Other participants engage in ECAs to improve their CVs, availability of time, for self-wellbeing and due to peer influence as represented in Figure 2B.

**Figure 2: A) Type of extracurricular activity engaged by students and the influences of the engagement in ECAs, B) Factors influencing the engagement in ECAs**





**Student engagement in studies and extracurricular activities (ECAs)**

Figure 3 Summarizes the time spent weekly on studies and ECAs by the respondents. The majority of the respondents (29%) have stated that they study 10-20 hrs per week while around 16% of respondents study less than 5 hrs per week. Around 25% and 26% of respondents have said that they study 20-30 hrs and 5-10 hrs per week, respectively. Only 4 % of the respondents study more than 30 hrs per week.

Around 64% of respondents spend less than 5 hrs per week on ECAs, while 20% spend around 5-15 hours, 9% of respondents spend around 10-15 hours, and 5% spend more than 15 hours on ECAs.

**Figure 3: Student engagement in A) Studies B) Extra Curricular Activities (ECAs) Learner perceived the impact of participation in ECAs on their academic progression, social isolation, soft skill development, and well-being.**

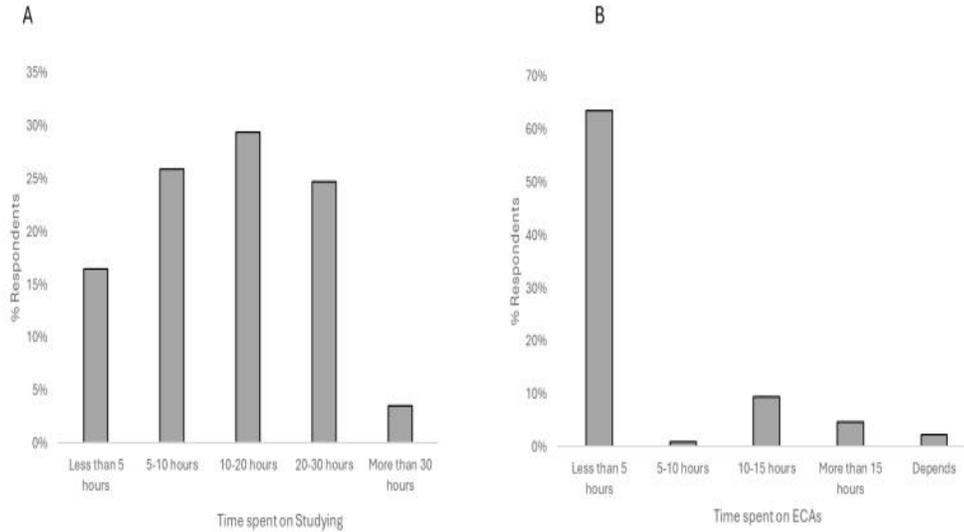


Table 1 shows the learner-perceived impact of engaging in ECAs on academic progression, social isolation, soft skill development, and well-being. Most of the respondents have agreed that participation in ECAs has helped them to develop their soft skills. Around 88% of respondents believed that engaging in ECAs has helped me to improve my time management skills. However, 34.9% of respondents have stated engaging in ECA might reduce the time for academic and career activities. Approximately 95% of respondents have stated that engagement in ECAs has helped them to improve peer engagement and reduce social isolation. Around 50% of respondents have agreed that engagement in ECAs has improved their retention in the degree program while around 31% were neutral about the statement. More than 80% of respondents agreed that ECAs have facilitated their skill development, intellectual capacity, overall well-being, exploration of new talent, and career readiness. However, around 25% of respondents believed engagement in ECAs leads to the neglect of academic and personal life. However, 40% of respondents did not agree with the statement.

**Table 1: Learner perceived impact of engagement in ECAs on academic success, skill development, social isolation, and overall well-being**

| Question                            | Percentage of the respondents (%) |       |         |          |                   |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
|                                     | Strongly Agree                    | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 1. Participating in extracurricular | 60.5                              | 37.2  | 2.3     | 0.0      | 0.0               |

|  |      |      |      |      |     |
|--|------|------|------|------|-----|
| activities has helped me to develop my soft skills   |      |      |      |      |     |
| 2. Participating in extracurricular activities has helped me to improve my time management skills        | 44.2 | 44.2 | 9.3  | 1.7  | 1.7 |
| 3. Participating in extracurricular activities reduced the time for academic and career activities       | 15.1 | 19.8 | 27.9 | 32.6 | 4.6 |
| 4. Participating in extracurricular activities has helped me to make friends and improve peer engagement | 46.5 | 48.8 | 3.5  | 1.2  | 0.0 |
| 5. Participating in extracurricular activities has helped me to reduce social isolation                  | 45.4 | 40.7 | 7.0  | 7.0  | 0.0 |
| 6. Participating in extracurricular activities prevents me from dropping out of the program              | 24.4 | 26.7 | 33.7 | 14.0 | 1.2 |
| 7. Participating in extracurricular activities has a positive impact on your overall well-being?         | 36.1 | 59.3 | 3.5  | 0.0  | 1.2 |
| 8. Participating in extracurricular activities improved  | 40.7 | 50.0 | 7.0  | 2.3  | 0.0 |

|   |      |      |      |      |      |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| my future career prospects.   |      |      |      |      |      |
| 9. Participating in extracurricular activities improved my intellectual capacity                            | 40.7 | 52.3 | 7.0  | 0.0  | 0.0  |
| 10. It's challenging for me to achieve my academic goals when I participate in extracurricular activities.  | 9.3  | 24.4 | 26.7 | 32.6 | 7.0  |
| 11. Participating in extracurricular activities led to a neglected personal life                            | 9.3  | 15.1 | 23.3 | 40.7 | 11.6 |
| 12. I have quit extracurricular activities to commit more time to academic activities                       | 4.7  | 30.2 | 22.1 | 26.7 | 16.3 |
| 13. Will you encourage your friends to engage in extracurricular activities during the undergraduate period | 36.0 | 50.0 | 8.1  | 2.3  | 3.5  |
| 14. Extracurricular activities allowed me to explore and nurture my talents overall                         | 44.2 | 47.7 | 8.1  | 0.0  | 0.0  |

### **Correlations between age, gender, level of study, study hours, time spent on ECAs, and academic performance**

Table 2 summarizes the outcome of the hypothesis testing; The statistical analysis revealed that the younger students (age group less than 24 years) tend to think that

participating in ECAs leads to a neglected personal life (Q11) (Kruskal Wallis;  $p=0.01$ ). In general, the male students tend to think that participating in ECAs has significantly helped them to reduce social isolation (Independent t-test;  $p=0.01$ ), improve their future career prospects (Independent t-test;  $p<0.05$ ), improve their intellectual capacity (Independent t-test;  $p=0.01$ ) and allowed them to explore and nurture talents overall (Independent t-test;  $p=0.03$ ). It also revealed that there was a statistically significant (Independent t-test;  $p=0.02$ ) which elaborated that the male students in general exhibit a likelihood of increased academic proficiency by engaging in more extracurricular activities.

No statistical significance was observed between the level of study, academic proficiency with the engagement in ECAs. The study revealed that the students who studied for more hours tended to think that participating in ECAs significantly reduce their time for academic and career activities (Q3) (Independent t-test;  $p=0.01$ ). Further, it was revealed that there is no statistical significance between the students who spent more hours on ECAs and their academic proficiency ( $p>0.05$ ).

**Table 2: Hypothesis testing results of the formulated study hypothesis**

| Hypot hesis    | Test Type            | Results  | Outcome   |
|----------------|----------------------|--|---|
| H <sub>1</sub> | Kruskal Wallis       | Total Score ( $p = 0.20$ )<br>Q11 ( $p = 0.01$ ) | There is a positive impact on younger students by engaging in ECAs.   |
|                |                      | Total Score ( $p = 0.02$ )                       | There is a positive relationship between the male students and the likelihood of increased academic proficiency when engaging in more ECAs. |
| H <sub>2</sub> | Indepen dent t- test | Q5 ( $p = 0.01$ )                                | Male students tend to think that participating in ECAs has helped them to reduce social isolation.  |
|                |                      | Q8 ( $p < 0.01$ )                                | Male students tend to think that participating in ECAs has helped them to improve their future career prospects.                            |
|                |                      | Q9 ( $p = 0.01$ )                                | Male students tend to think that participating in ECAs has helped them to improve their intellectual capacity.                              |

|                |                |   |  |
|----------------|----------------|---|--|
|                |                | Q14 (p = 0.03)                          | Male students tend to think that participating in ECAs has helped them to explore and nurture talents overall.   |
| H <sub>3</sub> | Kruskal Wallis | Total Score (p = 0.59)                  | There is no positive relationship between the level of study and engagement in ECAs.   |
| H <sub>4</sub> | Kruskal Wallis | Total Score (p = 0.46)                  | There is no positive correlation between the engagement of students in ECAs and the academic proficiency.  |
| H <sub>5</sub> | Kruskal Wallis | Total Score (p = 0.97)<br>Q3 (p = 0.01) | There is a positive relationship between the students who studied for more hours and them thinking that participating in ECAs reduced their time for academic and career activities. |
| H <sub>6</sub> | Kruskal Wallis | Total Score (p = 0.06)                  | There is no positive relationship between the students who spent more hours on ECAs and their academic proficiency of them influenced by engaging in ECAs.                           |

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study provides a unique opportunity to understand the perception of distance learners on engagement in ECAs and their effects on academic growth, skill development, and barriers to participation. The OUSL is only the state university in Sri Lanka that offers higher education opportunities via open and distance modes. The OUSL is no exception for other ODL institutes around the world and faces the major issue of higher student dropout rates (Jayasinghe et al., 2021). The higher dropout rates are mainly attributed to social isolation and the inability to balance the work/study environment and over the years many interventions have been introduced to minimize the dropouts and to reduce the social isolation. One of the strategies to minimize the dropout rate is to break the social isolation by increasing the interaction among the students (Jayasinghe et al., 2022). Generally, OUSL Students' daily life is different from a conventional university student which comprises work, independent studies, and family. This student community is separated by place and

phase, and they also have minimum interactions with peers (Jayasinghe et al., 2018). Engagement in ECAs is considered an effective way to increase student engagement and subsequently reduce social isolation and remain in the degree program.

The present study investigated the perception of a cohort of BSc undergraduates about engagement in extracurricular and the impact on their academic progression and skill development at the OUSL. According to the results, it was revealed around 79% of the respondents engaged in ECAs and the major motive for the engagement has been the “interest in the ECA”. Most of the respondents have engaged in faculty clubs as their ECAs. The Faculty of Natural Sciences consists of 6 departments and out of that 5 departments have their own official staff student interactive club or society which provides various attractive extracurricular activities such as voluntary projects, workshops, field visits, industrial visits, and voluntary teaching programmers. As most of the respondents stated, the wide array of activities organized by these societies and clubs has generated interest in students to participate in the activities. Organizing, managing, and participating in society activities allowed the students to demonstrate their skills and abilities to others and, most importantly, to themselves. Participation in extracellular activities is dependent on individual factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and employability. In this study, a special emphasis was given to understanding how the age of students influences their choice of ECAs as the OUSL student population is diverse in their age. There was no significant impact of age on the choice of ECAs and the engagement in the respective ECA they had selected among the OUSL students. While in general across the globe young students perceive extracurricular activities as a chance to enjoy their lives and increase peer interactions (Lumley et al., 2015).

Though, there was no significant impact of age on the selection of ECAs among the OUSL student cohort significant percentage of younger students have perceived that participating in ECAs led to a neglected personal life. This could mainly be attributed to the financial pressure faced by the students as suggested by other studies as well (Lumley et al., 2015). Younger students who enter OUSL immediately after their secondary education tend to focus on the academic grades needed for their employment and select only activities that impact their credit and career preparation. Students perceiving higher education higher education acquires a huge cost and investment and therefore students tend to manage their time for knowledge acquisition rather than spending time on other activities.

Previous studies have observed that some ECAs are gendered in their participation. ECAs like music, dance, art, and voluntary work have a higher preference among females while participation in sports is more male dominated (Donnelly et al., 2019).

Interestingly, a significant percentage of male student believed that engaging in ECAs helps them to increase their academic proficiency, and reduce social isolation, improve their intellectual capacity, explore and nurture talents overall. Overall, it is elaborated that male students in general exhibit a likelihood of increased academic progression by engaging in more extracurricular activities and increasing retention in degree programs. Though there was a gender bias in learners' perceived impact of ECA engagement on academic progression, there was no bias in engagement in ECAs. Similar to the present study, Nadler (1985) also stated that there has been no association between gender differences in participating or not participating in ECAs.

The present study also did not observe a positive correlation between the level of study and engagement in ECAs. Contradicted to this finding, most other studies have identified students in their earlier years of university tend to engage in ECAs than final year (Wijewantha, 2013). Further, this study failed to observe a positive correlation between employment status and engagement in ECAs. According to the results, it is revealed that students choose ECAs based on the interest they have rather than considering the time constraints they have due to their employability.

The student community in the OUSL is diverse in their ethnicity and religion (Jayasinghe et al., 2018). Some studies highlight religious and ethical biases in participating in the ECAs (Wijewantha, 2013). However, the present study did not look into the aspect of the effect of ethnicity and religion on selecting and participating in ECAs. The weekly engagement in both studying and ECAs was investigated to identify which learning model was followed by the OUSL students. Most of the respondents of this study engaged in studying for about 10-20 hours per week and less than 5 hrs per week is spent on ECAs. There is a positive relationship between the students who studied for more hours and them thinking that participating in extracurricular activities reduced their time for academic and career activities. This observation supports the Threshold model (Seow and Pan, 2014). Though the respondents are aware of the advantages of engagement in ECAs, there was clear recognition of the need to balance extra-curricular activities with study and other forms of academic work.

Measuring student engagement is more challenging in ODL settings than traditional face-to-face learning and should be measured differently (Henrie et al., 2015). Interestingly, some studies have taken ECAs as a source of student engagement as participation in extracurricular activities was positively correlated by respondents with personal growth and skill development (Henrie et al., 2015). Researchers have been interested in measuring the ECA's contributions to academic progression. However, there is persistent debate on the time commitment of ECAs and their

impact of academic performances (Mendis et al., 2023). Previous studies have observed that engagement in ECAs can improve academic proficiency (Mendis et al., 2023). According to Stuart et al. (2011), involvement in extracurricular activities is thought to help individuals develop social networks and social capital that support discipline and adherence to institutional expectations (Osterman, 2000). In the present study, majority of the students have stated that engagement in ECAs can improve their intellectual capacities and skill development. Learners did not perceive that positive relationship between the students who spent more hours on extracurricular activities and their academic proficiency influenced by engaging in extracurricular activities. Most of the respondents have stated that ECAs have helped them to increase peer interactions and reduce social isolation and retention in the degree program. This observation has a greater impact as ECAs can be implemented to increase the retention of students with the degree program. However, in the present study, more than 40% of respondents believed that their personal life is neglected when engaging in ECAs and it is difficult to achieve academic goals when participating in ECAs. Hence, a direct correlation should be assessed between engagement in ECAs and academic performance. However, in the present study an empirical approach to validate the effect of engagement in ECA on academic progression has failed as most respondents have not entered their GPA values.

The majority of the respondents agreed that engagement in ECAs facilitates their skill development, and time management skills. Also, more than 80% agreed that they get the opportunity to explore and nurture new talents by engaging in ECAs. The variety of life experiences acquired via extracurricular involvement in sports, music, and the arts domains, offer excellent prospects for the labor market. A graduate has a comparative advantage over a normal candidate when applying for a job, but they must be more qualified to come forward where only the degree will not be helpful. Previous results have identified whether there is a significant engagement in extracurricular activities in determining the employability of undergraduates in Sri Lanka (Kumarasinghe & Udeshika, 2015).

Contemporary universities generally have the main mission of producing academically competent and skilled labor. This mandate implies a need to quantify educational quality and skill development interventions. The ECA designed by the universities should be aligned with the student's abilities and needs to get the desired outcomes (Shamsudin et al., 2014). For positive outcomes from ECA, it is necessary that students not only voluntarily participate in various ECA activities but also that there are university-level efforts to provide students with programs that are beneficial and assist them in managing their performance (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). For ECA to have a positive impact, students must not only engage in a variety

of ECA activities, but college-level initiatives must also be made to offer students programs that are advantageous and help them manage their performance (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study emphasizes the importance of integrating extracurricular activities into the core curriculum to enhance students' knowledge and comprehension, skill development, and retention in the ODL system. Additionally, this study suggests conducting a thorough exploratory investigation to look at the relationship between extracurricular activities and academic success. A direct correlation between academic success interim of GPA or pass rates of credits and engagement in ECAs is necessary to support the pedagogical interference. Future research should look at certain activities and how they impact program outcomes and graduate attributes, hence the following recommendations can be made.

Also, it is recommended that the ECAs should be aligned with the requirements of the students. Institutions should ensure that the extracurricular ECA they provide are designed to suit the abilities and needs of the students that are pertinent to both personal and academical development (Shamsudin et al., 2014). In order to optimize the benefits of ECAs, it's critical to create an atmosphere that inspires students to willingly participate.

Further, it is important to offer institutional assistance for successful management of ECAs. Colleges and universities could set up mechanisms such as workshops on time management, mentorship programs that assist learners in handling their involvement in the ECA as well as their academic success (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Further, inter university level ECAs can be promoted to ensure the linkage among the universities. Further, an informal evaluation methods or yearly recognition system can be incorporated to encourage students to participate in ECAs along with their academic activities.

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