

EXPLORING THE INPUT OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING PROCESSING SYSTEM OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, SRI LANKA: DETECTING POSSIBLE INFLUENTIAL FACTORS FOR REGISTERING STUDENTS FOR THE B.SC DEGREE PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION

A natural or an artificial processing system (PS) consists of input, process and output. Many factors which influence its components are interconnected and hence makes it a huge complexity. PS makes changes due to spatial and temporal variations. Where an education of PS is concerned the input is first time registered students and their diverse characteristics. The process will be the components of teaching learning process including diverse academic and management structures. Output is considered as the developing skills of students, knowledge and possible changes in their mind set and behavior.

Where the OUSL is concerned the input is comparatively diverse Viz. existing qualification of students, socio-economic factors, age, attitudes and needs, governing forces for education etc. (Jayatillaka *et al.*, 1997). The major components (teachers, students and academic and management structures) of a ODL, PS play comparatively different roles. But finally, the quality of output should be equal or higher than in conventional setups. Exploration and evaluation of the nature of input is very important for future application to make suitable changes in PS as well as making final best quality products efficiently with minimizing losses. Quantification of different factors which belong to different segments (Input, process and output) of PS is very important for sustainable management and prediction of ODL PS of OUSL. As an initiative step we evaluated the nature of input (first registrant) of ODL, PS of B.Sc. degree program adapted by OUSL.

Objective of the study

To identify student characteristics.

To find out possible influential factors for selection.

To explore the main purposes for registering as a B.Sc student at OUSL.

To find out the student's attitude on the standard of OUSL.

To explore the student's future hopes and target after completion.

METHODOLOGY

Surveying technique was adapted for with a piloted structured questionnaire to explore the source of information, attitude on OUSL, purpose of registering and characteristics of the 456 (approximately 35% of the population) B.Sc. undergraduates, OUSL who are first registered in 2013/2014. The questionnaire included 14 items to evaluate personal characteristics and other influential factors for selecting the OUSL (Kuruppuarachchi and Gunerathne, 2014). An open ended section to recognize student's future hopes and target after completion of the program was also included.

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Statistical analyses:

Frequency tabulation and cross tabulation tests were performed for the answers of each item using the SPSS statistical package. Answers for the open ended component were quantified as Response Frequency percentages (AAPOR, 2000).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of the student characteristics.

Status of permanent residence of students was distributed as rural (31%), semi-urban (43.4%), and urban (24.8%). Their school education was different from highly popular school (36.4%), urban national school (38.4%), Semi-urban (15.9%) and rural school (8.3%) respectively. It indicates that most of students has “good school background” due to most of science G.C.E (A/L) discipline being mainly restricted to popular schools. Distance to OUSL from the student’s permanent residence showed that 0-49 km (39.6%), 50-99km (27.6%), 100-150km (16.4%), >150km(15.9%) respectively. It is clear that 67% are residing less than 99 km distance. Comparatively more face to face contact sessions were included into the science based disciplinary. It is convenient that a student may be able to travel to the university within less than 2 hours. A total monthly family income of the students represented as less than Rs. 15,000(21%), Rs. 16,000-30,000(47.5%), Rs.31, 000-45,000(16.7%), Rs.46, 000-60,000(8.1%) and more than Rs.60, 000 (0.2%) respectively. According to the Department of Census and Statistics, 2013, the monthly mean and median household income in year 2012 in Sri Lanka was as Rs.46, 207 and Rs.30, 400 respectively, which includes that urban (Rs.68, 336, Rs.41, 958), rural (Rs.42, 184, 28,921), estate sector (Rs.31,895, 25,668). It showed that a majority of students registered for B.Sc. degree are from the lowest income categories (68.5% below Rs.30, 000). Hence, the study group can be classified into lower middle class or as economically lowest categories. Economically poor students have a lack of confidence based on real or perceived weaknesses in preparation (Lee Warren, 2016). They are naturally come to university with a lower level of academic skills than their middle and upper class peers.

The highest educational level of father/mother or other family members of registrants are mostly (84%) below G.C.E. (A/L). It implies that most of them are middle class employees and they show more ambition on further education. Most of students are unmarried (92%) and employed (53%) below 27 years old (92%). Educational expenses are born by parents or a family member (60%) and self-finance (38%). Generally, low-income students struggle to survive the transition from home to college because their experiences and social class backgrounds often leave them confused about the middle-class cultural norms that are expressed in university life (Karen Collias, 2014). In addition, physically isolating nature of ODL teaching- learning process also create psychological distress, social exclusion, and academic anxiety for such adolescence groups. Kurupparachchi *et al.*, 2012 found out that, B. Sc. undergraduates of OUSL are comparatively psychologically distressed due to adjustment difficulties to the university life. So, the Faculty of Natural Sciences, OUSL has recently (2014) introduced „Peer- Assisted Study Sessions“ (PAAS) for first registering students with the help of existing and newly graduated OUSL students as young mentors (Bandarage *et al.*, 2015). But, it is recorded that poor students participation will affect the PASS programme. So, the university has a big role to play to guide students to adjust themselves to the new environment of the university. These findings are very important for decision makers to make future educational administrative decisions in the Faculty.

Possible influential factors for selection.

Table 1. Source of information about OUSL

Source of information	Number of responses	Percentage (%)
Former OUSL students	140	34.1
Other friends	72	17.6
News papers	68	16.6
School teachers and adults	60	14.6
OUSL web site	44	10.7
Television	26	6.3

Information on OUSL perceived by first registrants were represented in Table 01. Source of information for selection of OUSL are former OUSL students (34%), other friends (18%) and teachers/adults (15%) which contributed more than 66%. Result showed that personally or individually broadcasting of information on OUSL by human interactions is the most effective system. Results show that, providing of information by newspapers (16.4%) or the OUSL web site (11%) is more powerful than TV advertisements. So, the upgrade and development of the existing OUSL web site in a user friendly manner will have considerable impact on broadcasting information about OUSL in future.

Purpose for getting registered as a B.Sc. student at OUSL.

Table 2. Main purpose of registered as a B.Sc. student at OUSL.

Main purpose of getting registered	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Eager to study more	182	44.1
Future prospects of the current job	90	21.8
Adding a qualification to get a job	63	15.3
Easy to follow the degree due to part time nature	36	8.7
Easy payment scheme	28	6.8
No alternative after A/L	14	3.4

Table 02 indicates the inner needs of individuals to get an OUSL degree. It is mainly governed by “eager to study more” which contributed 44%, “future prospect of current job” 22%, “adding qualification for the purpose of finding employment” was provided 15%. “Easy payment schemes” or “part-time nature in ODL system” has become minor factors. Hence, academic structure of B.Sc. degree program should provide knowledge on “future education prospects in the field” in addition to job oriented course units. Cross tabulation results showed that unemployed students are more eager (52.6%) to learn when compared with their

counterparts (36.6%). It would be the fact that unemployed students have comparatively less other commitments, hence more attention on further education. Similarly students who get financial support from parents (48%) are registered as “eager to study more” compared to the self-financed group (38%). Students those who studied at popular schools (43%), Urban national schools (47.4%), Semi-urban national schools (36.9%), Rural Schools (50%) selected “eager to study more” as their option.

Student’s attitudes on the standard of OUSL.

Table 3. Students’ attitudes on standard of OUSL.

Student’s attitudes	Number of Responses	Percentage (%)
Equal to other state universities	326	81.1
Below the state universities	06	1.5
Above the state universities	20	5.0
Equal to private universities	14	3.5
Below private universities	03	0.7
Above the private universities	33	8.2

More than 88% of the students perceived that the standard of the OUSL is equal to that of other state universities (80%) or greater than that of private universities (8%). A positive impression on OUSL at the beginning would be a motivation factor for future success in educational achievements.

Students’ future hopes and targets after the completion of the programme.

The Perceived answers for open ended part on “*future hopes and target after completion of the program*” can be categorized as “*find a suitable employment*” included 38.19 frequency percentages. From this more than 50% frequencies prefer government jobs including teaching, employment related to chemistry or microbiology subject areas. “*Further development of career*” was provided 30.40%. For “*Further education and improvement of knowledge*” weight was given only 17.08%. Then, *lack of future hopes* (8.29%), *migrate to better country* (2.75%), *service to the country and the society* (2.51%), *getting better social recognition* (0.75%) were given comparatively lower preference. whether the student’s purpose for registration ranked as is “*Eager to study more*” (Table 03), the future hopes would be mainly on employment development strategies. Most of new registrants to the B.Sc. degree programme in 2012/13 is from low income categories. Naturally, such group of students need to fulfill their basic needs rather than thinking about “service to the nation” or higher order needs. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs clearly highlighted that one must satisfy lower level basic needs before progressing on to meet higher level growth needs (Huitt, 2007). So, a majority of B.Sc. undergraduates would be hoping to find suitable employment as soon after completion of the degree programme. To facilitate the clients’ requirements, the curriculum of the B.Sc. degree should be given more applicable areas based on skill development, suited to accommodate the future job market while maintaining the dignity of subject areas of the science degree.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, a majority of B.Sc. undergraduates represent the employed, late adolescent lower middle class. Therefore, policy makers of the faculty should consider such specific characters

of students when formulating future education strategies. Former OUSL students have become the most powerful media source for attracting students to OUSL. Hence, client based efficient individual counselling procedure is proposed to increase the future student numbers. More job oriented applied areas and strengthening of career guidance for the B.Sc. undergraduates are recommended to cater to future hopes of students.

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