

# LEARNER SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION – AN EXPERIENCE WITH THE POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION PROGRAMME AT OUSL

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## INTRODUCTION

The term *open and distance learning (ODL)* and its definitions are relatively new in the field of education, having gained prominence only in the past 25 to 30 years. Distance education provides an alternative to traditional education. It provides an opportunity to learners to continue their educational activities in a convenient and flexible manner. In order to facilitate their learning, learner support services are offered. Learner support is a continuous process, which begins with the issuing of applications and ends with the awarding of a Degree. Numerous attempts have been made by researchers in order to define the term “Learner Support”. According to Molefi, (1988) learner support comprises “any systems or procedures that are purposefully created and effectively utilized by a distance education institution to support and or facilitate teaching and learning at a distance”.

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was established in 1980 by the Government of Sri Lanka under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978. The OUSL is unique in the national university system being the only university which offers programmes through the distance mode. The OUSL has adopted unique mechanisms to provide support services for its learners.

A number of research studies conducted in different distance educational institutions have identified the problems faced by the students in distance educational institutions and the importance of learner support services in order to overcome such problems (Ghosh: 2009, Lekamge *at el*: 1999).

The Post Graduate Diploma in Education Programme (PGDE) is one of the pioneering programmes offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka from its establishment. The present study focuses on how far the administrative and academic learner support services provided by the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education (STE) have facilitated the activities of student teachers enrolled in the PGDE programme.

In line with the main objective the following research questions have been formulated:

1. What is expected by student teachers as learner support in an ODL system?
2. How far the existing learner support services have addressed the needs of the learner?

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3. What were the problems faced by the student teachers when accessing learner support services?
4. What strategies had been followed by the student teachers to overcome such problems?
5. What suggestions had been made by the student teachers in order to strengthen the existing learner support services?

## METHODOLOGY

The population of the study comprised of 1200 student teachers who had been enrolled in Sinhala medium of the PGDE programme for the academic year 2011/2012 in all centres island wide. Out of the student population, a purposive sample was selected on the basis of the cluster system of the Regional and Study Centres of the OUSL. The selected cluster consisted of one Regional Centre and three Study Centres; Namely, Colombo Regional Centre, Ratnapaura, Kalutara and Gampaha Study Centres. The sample consisted of 25 percent of students who had been registered in the Sinhala medium at the selected centres. Data were gathered from only those who were present in the respective centre on the day of visit by the researcher. The main instrument of data collection was a questionnaire. Group discussions were also conducted in order to gather more descriptive data. These group discussions were conducted with 20 percent of student teachers who were included in the sample.

Centre	Number of Students Registered	Sample selected	Distribution of Questionnaire	Participation for Group Discussion
Colombo	200	60	60	12
Ratnapaura	94	30	30	6
Gampaha	100	30	30	6
Kalutara	100	30	30	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>494</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>30</b>

**Table1: The Sample**

Data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively. Open ended questions and group discussions were analyzed qualitatively.

## ANALYSIS

The sample consisted of 150 graduate teachers. From the sample 91% had graduated from the conventional university system of the country and 9% were graduates of the OUSL. It was revealed that a majority of the teachers were not engaged in academic studies through the distance mode at all prior to enrolling in the PGDE Programme.. However, the majority of students were, aware of what was meant by distance education.

The study revealed that almost all student teachers did expect learner support from the very beginning. This finding was supported by a study conducted by Lekamge *at el* (2009). 91% of the sample has stated that, as the programme was new and the mode of delivery was different, they were expecting learner support services from the institution. Those who had graduated from the OUSL have stated, though they were aware of the mode of delivery and the administrative system, they expected academic guidance and counseling in order to continue the programme satisfactorily. It was revealed that almost all students were expecting academic support as learner support in this programme. They wanted to pay greater attention to “understanding subject

matter”, “contacting academics at any time they needed academic support”, “how to use the module” etc. It was revealed the student teachers were not aware that the support provided on administrative matters is also considered as a part of learner support.

In order to identify, how far learner support services have been able to address the needs of the learner, different statements were included focusing on different aspects of learner support services of the department. These statements focused on the pre-registration, registration process, inauguration of the programme, day schools, academic counseling on different aspects at different stages, tutorials, examination support and other services provided by the university, while they engaged in the programme. It was revealed that 98% of the sample was satisfied with the instructions provided, prior to the registration and the registration procedure. They agreed that the instruction provided had helped them to complete the registration process satisfactorily.

Participation in the inaugural session is compulsory for all students. The inaugural session of the programme focuses on directing students on how they will be facilitated with learner support services while they are engaged in academic activities through the distance mode. The following table focuses on the students' responses in this regard.

	Statement	Disagreed %	Agreed %	Neutral %	Not responded
04	I'm satisfied with the explanation made on process of the beginning of the academic activities till end of the programme	4	96	-	-
05	I'm satisfied with the explanation made on how academic activities will be continued.	4	95	1	-
06	I'm satisfied with the instructions provided how the practical components were carried ou	3	94	1	2
07	I have a clear idea on the assessment process from the beginning to the end	31	67	-	2

**Table2: Teachers’ responses on the conduct of inaugural sessions**

As shown in Table no 2 it is revealed that, inaugural sessions have helped the majority of the students to understand how they could continue with the programme and how they could obtain learner support services while they were engaged in the learning process. However, 67% have stated that they were not clear about the assignment process at the beginning of the programme.

The main objective in conducting day schools is to provide opportunities for student teachers to get support from the tutorial staff to solve their academic problems. In Table 3, statement 09 to 13 focused on how students were aware of the support provided during the day schools.

It is significant that 88% of students have stated that instructions were not provided on how to use the module. At the discussion it was revealed that student had problems in identifying icons used in the modules which are used in house style format of the OUSL study materials. But, they were quite satisfied (58%) with the day school activities and they were able to understand how modules could be used accordingly.

Statement no	Statement	Disagreed %	Agreed %	Neutral %	Not Responded
<b>During the day school</b>					
09	The instructions provided helped me to understand how I should engage in the learning process as a distance learner	32	68	-	-
10	Instructions provided on how to use the module were satisfactorily.	88	12	-	-
11	Day schools were conducted focusing on how to use the module accordingly.	42	58	-	-
12	Adequate instructions and help were provided as prior preparation to assignments	88	8	4	-
13	Instructions provided to solve academic problems were satisfactory.	-	92	8	-

**Table 03: Teacher responses on learner support provided at the day school**

Further it was revealed that, though the academic staff had instructed student teachers to use the educational multimedia productions developed, a majority of the students in the respective regional centre were not interested in watching them.

Moreover, it was revealed that 92% student teachers were satisfied with the instructions provided during the day school in order to solve their academic problems. The problems have been minimized as the internal staff has engaged in conducting day schools. A majority of student teachers wanted to contact academics via telephone, in order to solve their problems. Most of their efforts had failed as the line was busy all the time. This led to a lot of frustration among students who felt that modern technology had failed to serve them at a time of need. Moreover it was revealed that they were not aware of other learner support facilities incorporated with modern technology such as e - mail facilities, web use, use of OUSL home page etc. This finding is contradictory with the findings of some previous research conducted by Hanafi *at el* (2005) that has explained how the learners have used technology as learner support in Malaysia.

In the OUSL context the process of continuous assessment plays an important role in the examination process. The students have to obtain eligibility to sit the final examination by obtaining a minimum of 40 marks for their continuous assessments. It was revealed that 88% of student teachers were not satisfied with the guidance provided on how they should engage in assignment writing. At the group discussion it was revealed that the majority of the student teachers were not satisfied with the grading and the feedback received for their assignments.

Providing academic support continuously is expected as learner support in distance education programmes. In order to provide academic support prior to the examination, tutorial classes were conducted. There, the students get the opportunity for solving their academic problems by referring to past papers and the module. Further, information on how the examination procedure would take place had been provided.

Statement no	Statement	Disagreed	Agreed %	Neutral %	Not Responded
	Tutorial sessions helped me,				
14	To be aware of the finalized examination time table	-	100	-	-
15	Was able to clarify academic problems in the modules	-	96	02	02
16	To understand how I should be prepared for the final examination.	-	91	08	01
17	To understand how I should answer for different papers at the final examination	-	97	01	02
18	Provided awareness on how the examination will be conducted	-	98	-	02
19	Made me aware of how I should overcome any problem faced prior to or during the examination period	-	100	-	-

**Table 04: Teacher responses on support provided at tutorial classes**

It was revealed that the conduct of tutorial sessions was very useful for students in order to clarify their academic problems and to face the final examination with confidence. As the majority of tutorials were conducted by the internal academics the students had been benefited in both academic and administrative aspects. Further, the study focused on revealing student opinion on the instruction provided by the department and about the support provided from other divisions as learner support.

Statement no	Statement	Disagreed %	Agreed %	Neutral %	Not Responded %
20	I'm aware of the different divisions that I should contact regarding other problems	65	31	-	4
21	Satisfactory support was provided by the academic and non academic staff to get information when needed	6	92	2	-
21	The instructions provided helped me to solve my problems accordingly	-	94	6	-
23	Services provided by the other divisions were satisfactory.	8	87	-	5
24	Adequate counselling services were provided by the academics	02	92	01	5

**Table 05: Teachers' responses on the learner support services provided in relation to programme**

The study revealed that, though the students had come to the end of the programme 65% of the sample were not aware of how they could obtain different learner support services relating to their problems. At the focus group discussion it was revealed that though the students had been provided an instructional manual at the registration, almost all student teachers had not paid attention to it. They always expected spoon feeding whenever they needed learner support. Student teachers were able to solve their problems with the guidance provided by the department. Further 92% of them were satisfied with the support rendered by the department and the other divisions of the OUSL.

Further, the study focused on the problems faced by the students while they were trying to obtain learner support services. It was revealed that 57% of the students had faced problems in answering take home assignments, such as understanding the questions, how to answer them, gathering required information etc. In order to overcome the problems, 78% of them have engaged in peer discussions, referring to the module several times. 14% of student teachers have shown interest in further reading in order to solve their academic problems. 17% of students faced

problems in understanding the module. They had mentioned that direct translations from English into Sinhala, had confused them in understanding the subject content. As the day school topics had not covered such sessions, the problem had become worse. Students were able to discuss such sections during the tutorial sessions.

As a majority of the student teachers faced problems regarding academic support; they suggested that the number of day schools conducted be increased. Further it was revealed that the student teachers attached to three study centers were frustrated as they had to work with a few academics who visited their centre throughout the year.

## **SUGGETIONS**

In order to minimize the existing weaknesses in the student support student teachers as well as the Dept of STE should work together. Department needs to make arrangements to create awareness among students to make use of different learner support services available such as email, referring the OUSL web, on line help desk etc.

It is also suggested to conduct a pre-orientation programme in regional centers prior to registration. In addition to existing day schools, a day school session should be added on how to write assignments after writing the 1<sup>st</sup> assignment. Further students should be motivated to refer to the instructional manual provided and student should have a positive attitude towards self study in an ODL system. Internal academics should be motivated to visit the study centers to conduct day schools.

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