Student Perceptions on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Services; With Special Reference to the Open University of Sri Lanka

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1 INTRODUCTION

Universities are in the business of providing higher education, and so it is to be expected that the students' classroom experience is a primary determinant of student satisfaction. Contact with fellow students, course content, equipment and stocking of libraries, teaching quality and the supply of teaching/learning materials and contact with staff (both teaching and non-teaching staff) are some of the factors that determine student satisfaction in Open and Distance Learning. A study in the USA found that students' perceptions of institutional ability to provide a good intellectual environment positively affects their level of satisfaction (Hartman and Schmidt, 1995).It can be seen in some studies done on Student Perceptions in the context of the Open University of Sri Lanka. Ranasinghe and Ranasinghe (2012) revealed that both the undergraduate and postgraduate students in the sample had a positive attitude towards learning English. Furthermore Abeykoon and Alwis (2016) in their study on management students at the Open University of Sri Lanka concluded that institutions are required to pay attention to factors such as quality of pedagogy, learner support, technological and even infrastructure as measure of meeting students' quality expectations. In a study

Ariadurai and Manohanthan, (2008) emphasized the need of enhanced learner support. In the same study they have observed that all OUSL academic and administrative staff should strive to provide a more proactive and supportive learning environment for its students. It is necessary to include follow up studies to analyse the persistence of students with their academic pursuits with enhanced facilities and support services. This study attempts to focus on Engineering Students' perception on "student support services" offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka

It is expected that this study would provide a better understanding of engineering students' perceptions on ODL services offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka. This will provide an insight into the problems faced by ODL learners in relation to the engineering programmes conducted at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

2 METHODOLOGY

The quantitative survey utilized a questionnaire based on earlier research (Wilkins and Balakrishnan, 2011) which consisted of 50 items sub grouped to 11

items based in relation to student perceptions, experience or satisfaction on Program, a five point likert scale (strongly disagree – 1 to strongly agree - 5) on Quality and availability of Study Materials **,**the lecture room, IT facilities, laboratory Facilities, services offered by the Institution**,** quality of instruction received, the duration of interaction with the instructors, feedback received on assignments and examinations, recreational facilities and social life**,**

student support services provided by the Open University and the challenges faced while learning at OUSL.

The study focused on the expectations and perceptions of ODL students learning at the Faculty of Engineering Technology.250 students were selected using the simple random sampling method, out of which 91 current students at Colombo Regional Center responded. Descriptive analysis of mean and standard deviation were evaluated to obtain results.

Table 1: Services offered by the Institution

		mean	SD	overall Mean	Overall SD
1. Program flexibility, relevance and intellectuality	I have flexibility in selecting the courses	3.51	1.23	3.08	0.95
	My course is relevant to my intended future employment	3.59	1.2		
	My course is intellectually stimulating	3.26	0.84		
2. Quality and availability of Study Materials	The course materials satisfy my learning needs	2.77	1.27		
	Course material understandable and clear	2.73	0.99		
	Appropriate supplementary materials available	2.67	1.12		
	the recommended texts available in the library	3.47	1		
	Technology is used to provide learning resources	3.35	1.21		
3. The lecture room	The lecture rooms have good level of cleanliness	3.21	1.1		
	The lecture rooms have good level of furnishing	3.13.	1.08		
	The lecture rooms have good level of lighting	3.18.	1.11		
	All lecture rooms have good audio-visual facilities	2.81	1.15		
4. The IT Facilities.	I can always find a computer to work when needed	2.27	1.17		
	Provision of internet facilities is satisfactory	2.77	1.26		
	I use ICT for research and to present my work	3.41	0.98		
5. The laboratory	Laboratory equipment available for the lab	3.24	1.2		
	Facilities at laboratories are satisfactory	3.15	1.2		

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Table One, students are satisfied with program flexibility, relevance and intellectuality as well as with the laboratory facilities. A segment of the students are of the view that the course materials do not satisfy their learning needs and IT facilities.

Table 2: The quality of instruction you receive

		mean	SD	overall Mean	Overall SD
How do you rate the quality of instruction you receive?	My lecturers make the subjects interesting	2.82	1.19		
	My lecturers are experts in their fields	3.31	1.02		
	My lecturers use language that I understand	3.3	1.08		
	My lecturers use technology well in their teaching	3.22	1.11		
Is the time of interaction with the instructors adequate?	I have as much contact with my lecturers	2.53	0.73		
	My lecturers are sympathetic if I have problems	2.96	1.14		
	I use email /SMS to interact with teachers	3.05	1.17		
	Use of LMS provide easy interaction with teachers	3.32	1.19	3.06	1.02
How often do you receive feedback on assignment and Examinations	Modules are assessed using a variety of methods	3.03	1		
	timetable is organized in a convenient way	3.02	1.01		
	I receive detailed and helpful feedback	2.84	1.09		
	I receive prompt feedback on performance	3.02	0.97		
	I receive prompt feedback on practical classes	3.19	1.1		
	Grades /marks I obtain are consistent with the effort I put into coursework/examinations	3.32	1.17		

Students perceive quality of instruction as comparatively satisfactory and this can be seen as same in receiving feedback on assignment and Examinations. Nevertheless the time of interaction with the instructors is rated as not adequate.

Table 3: Recreational facilities and social life

		mean	SD	overall Mean	Overall SD
Facilities and social life	My campus has a good range of facilities, e.g. a refectory, sports and leisure provision	2.43	1.3		
	University has lots of societies for students	2.38	1.12		
	A lot of leisure activities and entertainment are provided for students	2.26	1.16	2.54	0.93
	There is a lively social scene on campus	2.51	1.21		
	My university provides accommodation for students	3.05	1.19		

Table 4: Student support services provided by the Open University

		mean	SD	overall Mean	Overall SD
Student support services	Effective institutional network of technical assistance	3.41	1.16	3.30	0.91
	Administrative staff respond efficiently	3.31	1.1		
	University offers a good career guidance and internships service	3.18	1.21		

Table 5: The challenges faced in learning at OUSL

		mean	SD	overall Mean	Overall SD
What are the challenges that you face in learning at OUSL	Volume of study material for the subject appropriate	2.96	1.27	3.12	1.85
	Distance from home to the regional centre	3.27	1.13		
	Attending face to face classes	3.18	1.04		
	Attending Laboratory practical classes	3.22	1.06		
	Working environment conducive to study	2.98	1.1		
	Difficulties in learning technically demanding material	3.1	1.18		
	Lack of experience and/or training with instructional	3.04	1		
	Financial constraints	3.05	1.09		
	Lack of support from family, employer, friends etc.	3.14	1.31		
	Unfavourable home learning environment	3.16	1.17		
	Conflicts between family /Work and study schedule	3.21	1.16		

Table 6: responses by the students

	Overall mean	Overall SD
Services offered by the Institution	3.08	0.95
The quality of instruction you receive	3.06	1.02
Recreational facilities and social life	2.54	0.93
Student support services provided by the Open University	3.30	0.91
The challenges faced in learning at OUSL	3.12	1.85

Students are satisfied with the accommodation provided, but not satisfied with refectory, sports facilities, leisure activities, entertainment, clubs and societies for students. Students perceive that institutional network of technical assistance and response from administrative staff is satisfactory. But this is not in the case for career guidance and internship services. Table 5 shows that distance to regional centre, attending classes, lack of support from family,

employer, and friends etc., conflicts between family/work and study schedule, learning environment are perceived as major impediments in Open and Distance learning. This is aligned with the research done by Simpsion (2012) which discuss two most important sources of support to students apart from the institution for

success in Open and Distance learning. One source of support is from families and friends who could give enhanced organizational and motivational support. The second source of support is from other students forming self-help groups and student mentoring (Table 6).

it can be argued that there should be improvement in terms of all sections to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be seen that Recreational facilities and social life, the quality of instruction received, services offered by the Institution and the challenges faced in learning at OUSL are at an average level and need improvement. Student support services provided by the Open University (3.30) is in the highest category. Anyway

It can be recommended having interaction with students in terms of association through societies and welfare activities to understand their needs, wants and expectations. Furthermore continuous studies on student expectations are vital in this challenging environment.

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