



OPENING MINDS:
RESEARCH FOR SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT

Needs Analysis of Prospective Learners to Develop a Psychology Degree Programme in Open and Distance Learning Mode

K.S.A. Colombage and G.P. Gamage*

¹Department of Psychology and Counselling, Faculty of Health Science, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka

**Corresponding author: Email: gpgam@ou.ac.lk*

1 INTRODUCTION

Identifying the perceived needs of prospective learners can be beneficial for the development of new academic programmes and related curriculum. Many needs assessment surveys are reported by medical education and teaching English as a second language programmes (Grant, 2002; Walsh, 2006). Based on this premise, a needs survey was conducted to understand the perceived needs of prospective learners of a proposed Psychology degree programme at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL).

There are opportunities to gain a four-year degree in Psychology (Bachelor of Arts) within the national university system of Sri Lanka. These programmes offer admission based on the z-score and many who do not achieve the required z-score but pass the GCE (Advanced Level) examination and those who have work experience in related subfields in Psychology are unable to obtain academic qualifications in Psychology, unless they opt to enrol at private institutions and universities with the burden of high tuition fees. In this context, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methodologies are an important modality to disseminate academic education and training programmes in developing nations due to

two main reasons; (i) the significant shortage of qualified and trained individuals to teach/train, and (ii) the need to provide accessible and flexible academic/training programmes for those from various geographic, socio-economic, and professional backgrounds (Lentell, 2007; Nti, 2015). The shortage of degrees in Psychology that produce graduates who are capable of assisting the health sector to manage psychological needs and wellbeing of the country is a major justification for the choice of programme discipline. These were highlighted by several government documents such as the Strategic Framework for Development of Health Services in Sri Lanka (2016) and The Mental Health Policy of Sri Lanka (2005), as well as the recent report on missing persons in Sri Lanka offering a non-governmental perspective under the title 'Living in Uncertainty' (ICRC, 2016). Thus, shortages in the labour market (and in academia) exist within the country that will benefit our future graduates. Hence, the needs assessment was primarily focused on exploring the different aspects of the need for a Psychology degree among prospective learners. Furthermore, it is expected that the results survey will assist the developers of the proposed programme to understand critical elements for the



development of course material as well as the related requirements of prospective learners such as their exposure to the open and distance learning (ODL) mode.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Design

Data was gathered through a web based survey made available on the Department of Psychology and Counselling at OUSL website from December 2015 to March 2016. The survey included eighteen (18) questions. The questions were specifically developed to gather information pertinent to understanding the needs of prospective learners and to gauge the profile of the prospective learner by gathering information such as academic background, employment status, interest in and reasons to pursue a Psychology degree, employer support (if employed), and prior exposure to ODL mode.

2.2 Participants

The online survey participants (N=211) were gathered through the convenience sampling method. It was expected that only those who were interested in a Psychology degree programme would be searching for similar programmes. Some participants were directed towards the website and encouraged to complete the survey if they made enquiries about Psychology programmes offered by the OUSL, either via telephone or in-person.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

211 participants completed the online survey within three months, from December 2015 to March 2016. A descriptive analysis of the data presented several important factors that can positively influence the content and delivery of the Psychology degree programme.

Prior-Educational Level: The analysis of educational qualifications of prospective learners indicated that 45% of the sample has completed their Advanced Level qualification, which is the minimum entry criterion for degree programmes at the OUSL. The other 55% reported that they have completed either an Undergraduate Degree (16%), Diploma (17%) or other professional qualifications (e.g. CIMA, Law) respectively. A substantial academic standing is a good indication of a learner's structured knowledge base, which Biggs (2007) identifies as aiding a deep approach to learning. This well-structured knowledge base contributes toward forming a deep learning approach. The deep learning approach is where a student reaches a higher cognitive capacity from a thorough understanding of content and applications. Therefore, information on prospective learners' academic background is beneficial for programme content development. What this means in practice is that the content developers (authors) can write material in such a way that the intended audience (the learner) would easily comprehend and be actively engaged in the learning process.

Interest in Programme: The responses to the two questions measuring the interest towards the programme sought to find out "*Whether they plan to do the prospective degree and if they are interested in learning within the Open and Distance Learning mode*". There was clearly a high interest (90%) amongst the participants who reported their intention to pursue a degree, while 91% stated they would like to join this programme offered via the ODL mode (see Figure 1). This interest could also be a strong indication of the commitment of the participants to complete the degree once they have enrolled in it. This was further supported by the answer given by 64% of the sample as they mentioned that they have had no exposure to the ODL mode. Even though they might not be exposed to or are not familiar with self-directed learning, these prospective learners show a keen interest



in pursuing this degree in an unfamiliar mode. This is a strong indication of their interest in the discipline of Psychology. Hence, this provides insight as to why students are interested in Psychology (i.e. to become counsellors, for personal development, assist in current career path, etc.), so that content can be developed accordingly. For example, relevant case studies could be used to relate to the diverse backgrounds of the prospective learners.

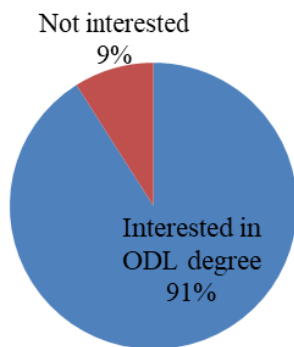


Figure 1: Interest in the proposed programme

Reasons to Pursue Proposed Programme: As stated in the paragraph above, reasons provided as to why the survey respondents wish to a programme in Psychology is an essential aspect of the learner profile so that course content as well as the nature of courses (subjects) offered can be structured to facilitate this learning need. Similarly, it is also an indication of the propensity of a learner to complete the degree and thereby successfully conclude the journey they embarked on when they decided to enrol in the degree programme. Therefore, it could also help to forecast 'success' from the learner's as well as the institution's perspectives. The percentage of prospective learners who stated that they intend to pursue this degree to gain an academic qualification was 44%, while 47% mentioned that the motivation was guided by the employment related 'training/career progression' reasons. There was a small percentage (less than

10%) that did not comment. These percentages correlate with declarations by respondents of anticipated benefits from completing the proposed degree programme such as career promotions, pay increments, paid leave, and study leave offered by most of their employers (See Figure 2).

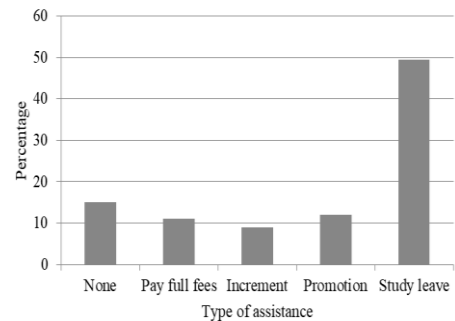


Figure 2: Expected assistance from employers

Employment Status: Nearly 65% of the sample were employed at the time of the survey been conducted while 35% were unemployed or were currently engaged in studies at an education institute. The majority representing one industry were 13% who were employed as teachers/tutors while 10% were from the healthcare sector. The next largest category was the human resources and business sector with 8% of total participants. Even though there were higher percentages of employed individuals, the high costs of comparable degrees offered at private institutions were mentioned as a reason for searching for a programme with less of a financial burden and good quality education/training. Most of the 'employed' participants also indicated their preference towards this programme due to the flexibility at OUSL which allows them to study at their own pace while managing work responsibilities and family commitments. This was a crucial factor in their desire to enrol in the proposed degree programme.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An insight into the needs of prospective learners is essential to develop new programmes and design curricula, especially in a modality such as ODL where self-directed learning receives prominence. A programme designed to cater to the needs of prospective learners is vital to the success of the programme as well as the learner, as these needs directly influence motivation of the learners, commitment and successful completion of the programme. The identification of learner needs provides curriculum developers with information about the target audience of the programme and learning material, so that they can produce material that is relevant, relatable, and comprehensible to the learner as well as to future facilitators to effectively facilitate the learning process. Thus, such a needs assessment, or even a series of needs assessments targeting different aspects of stakeholder needs, will provide important information to the development process of an appropriate, relevant and high-quality study programme. It is assumed that this data driven approach to the development of a degree will benefit the institution and the prospective learners, while also assisting the needs of a country to fill existing gaps in the discipline of Psychology.

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