

LEARNER VIEWS ON DISTANCE LEARNING

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The learning modalities of higher education institutes (HEIs) in Sri Lanka include face-to-face, open and distance, and online modes of delivery. Many HEIs practice face-to-face learning while some institutes utilise the open and distance learning mode. Further, only a few institutes have launched online learning facilities. The Centre for Distance and Continuing Education (CDCE) at the University of Peradeniya is one such centre in the university system in Sri Lanka. The CDCE updates and upgrades its existing programmes while launching new online programmes to facilitate online learning. To upgrade and uplift the educational programmes offered through the CDCE, it is necessary to conduct a needs assessment study to identify demand-driven programmes with special reference to enrolment, content, student support services, the use of ICT, the mode of delivery, the teaching-learning process, learning outcomes, employability and so on. Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate the suitability and quality of the existing educational programmes administered by the CDCE, while paying special attention to the mode of delivery, employability of students and the new programmes that are to be launched to facilitate learners through the distance mode.

This study used a quantitative approach and the sample consisted of 534 Sri Lankans. The respondents included school teachers, high school students, current CDCE students, current undergraduates, staff members at the university, bank officers and the general public. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data on three factors: need, job-oriented nature and the mode of delivery. Each factor was measured through five items on a six-point Likert scale. The data was then analysed through quantitative analytical methods using SPSS 17.0. The learners' preferences on different courses were tested on 11 programmes. The results demonstrated acceptable reliability on the job-oriented nature and mode of delivery in Chronbach's alpha statistics. Results on the factor "need" showed the requirement of offering more diversified new programmes. According to the results for the factor 'job-oriented nature', the demand in job-related courses and the programmes' suitability for social development is very high. The results on the factor 'delivery mode' suggested the need to offer academic programmes in both the face-to-face and online modes to facilitate learners effectively. It was also suggested that online programmes are more suitable for the future. Of the three factors, the strongest factor was the mode of delivery. The highest correlation (.635) was observed between the factors of 'job-oriented nature' and 'mode of delivery'. This indicates that the mode of delivery expected by learners demands high consideration and that there is much concern about the nature of employment. Moreover, the strongest regression (.404) was between the factors 'job-oriented nature' and 'mode of delivery', indicating that the mode of delivery

expected by learners is predicted by their employment status. Since learners expect more diversified new programmes through the CDCE, different types of learner supportive and learner matching programmes are to be launched. These are expected to meet the needs of learners to facilitate their ability to face challenges successfully in their day-to-day life. Further, more learners prefer a hybrid mode in which both online and face-to-face sessions are included. The CDCE should launch new programmes on the disciplines of English language and computer-related courses as the demand for such courses is very high. The CDCE must also promote the designing of innovative, entrepreneur-oriented and skill-based online courses.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Need, Job Oriented nature, Mode of delivery

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