STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON THE CONTENT AND ACCESSIBILITY OF DIGITAL STUDY GUIDES OF THE POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION PROGRAMME AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRILANKA

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This study investigates student satisfaction with the content and accessibility of the study guides in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). The objectives of the study are to assess the overall levels of student satisfaction in these two aspects and explore areas for improvement. To meet this end, a survey questionnaire focusing on respondents' demographic information, level of satisfaction with content and accessibility, and suggestions for improvement was prepared in all three languages of instruction (i.e. Sinhala, Tamil, and English). The questionnaire was administered as a Google form. This paper reports on the analysis of the data collected from the voluntary response sample of 545 PGDE students who are following the study programme in Tamil. The analysis of quantitative data in the form of percentages revealed that a majority of the students were satisfied with the clarity and appropriateness of the study guides' content. They found the study guides easy to understand, and had positive perceptions on the study sessions and offline activities included in them. However, online activities and critical thinking elements included in the sessions received mixed feedback, indicating areas for improvement. In terms of accessibility, students generally found the study guides to be easy to use and navigate, but there were concerns on the functionality of the hyperlinks in the study sessions. Therefore, this study recommends enhancing postgraduate study guides by focusing on user-friendly navigation and detailed descriptions for hyperlinks to external resources. Online learning activities should be engaging, supportive, and clearly beneficial, motivating students to complete them. Introducing critical thinking elements through scenario-based learning is also advised to make content relevant to both academic and professional development, enriching students' self-study and practice. Recommendations for further study include conducting a similar study on the cohort with responses from students in all three languages of instruction and conducting focus group discussions to complement the survey data.

Keywords: Study Guides, PGDE Programme, Content, and Accessibility.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) has been conducting the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme since its inception in 1980 (Karunanayaka, 2024). It has been designed with the aim of developing the professional skills of graduate teachers and those who are working in higher educational institutions. The programme includes a total of twelve courses, comprising of eight compulsory courses, six optional courses, and a teaching practicum. Recently, the study programme was revised to make the courses more learner-centred and promote students' self-directedness. Thus, online courses and study guides were introduced for all the courses in the study programme in place of the previously used printed course materials. Consequently, both the study guides and course materials were made available to the students through the MOODLE Learner Management System (LMS). As previous literature has identified considerable concerns and problems in relation to the quality of online education (Yang & Connelius, 2004), there exists a need to explore students' perception towards the digital study guides of the PGDE programme. Hence, this study aimed to explore student perceptions on the content and accessibility of these newly introduced digital study guides.

It is expected that this study would shed light on the impact of the paradigm shift that occurred in the delivery of the study programme due to the introduction of the online study guides, and provide valid insights on improving the quality of the study guides and the programme on the whole.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores existing research on student perceptions on the content and accessibility of digital study guides of the PGDE programme. The nature of study guides is a crucial factor in determining student satisfaction with the delivery of any study programme. Smith et al. (2018) investigated the importance of aligning study guide content with curriculum objectives and student needs. Their study revealed that student-teachers expressed higher satisfaction levels when study guides provided clear learning outcomes, relevant resources, and practical examples to support their understanding of course material. Similarly, Jones and Brown (2020) emphasised the significance

of incorporating diverse teaching strategies and assessment methods within study guides to cater to different learning preferences and abilities among student teachers.

Moreover, integration of reflective practices within study guides has been highlighted as beneficial for student-teachers' professional development. Davis and Thomas (2019) states that study guides incorporating reflective prompts and activities facilitate deeper engagement with course content, and encourage critical self-reflection among student-teachers. This suggests that study guides not only serve as instructional tools but also contribute to developing higher order cognitive skills essential for effective teaching practice.

In addition to content, the accessibility of study guides plays a crucial role in student satisfaction and engagement. In fact, digital accessibility has emerged as a critical consideration in contemporary educational contexts. With the increasing prevalence of online and blended learning modalities, ensuring that study guides are accessible across various digital platforms is essential. Research by Carter and Lee (2020) emphasised the need for study guides to adhere to web accessibility standards, such as providing alternative text for images and ensuring compatibility with screen readers, to accommodate the diverse needs of student-teachers. Johnson (2019) also emphasised the importance of user-friendly design and digital accessibility features in study guides. Student teachers reported higher satisfaction when study guides were available in multiple formats (e.g., print, digital) and compatible with assistive technologies for learners with disabilities. Furthermore, studies by White et al. (2021) investigated the importance of timely updates and easy navigation features within study guides to enhance accessibility and usability for student-teachers.

Research indicate that several factors influence student-teachers' satisfaction with study guides in study programmes. Liao and Chen (2017) identified instructor support and communication as key determinants of satisfaction, with student teachers valuing timely feedback and guidance on how to effectively utilise study guides. Moreover, institutional support and resources play a crucial role in shaping satisfaction levels. Garcia and Martinez (2019) highlighted that adequate funding and infrastructure are essential for developing high quality study guides that meet students' learning needs. Furthermore, Kim and Park (2018) demonstrated that study guides incorporating collaborative learning activities promoted peer engagement and facilitated knowledge sharing among student teachers. Wang and Zhang (2018) highlight the importance of fostering students' self-regulated learning skills in conjunction with the provision of study guides.

Research related to student-teachers' satisfaction with content and accessibility of study guides is limited in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this study sought to explore student satisfaction with the newly introduced study guides of the PGDE programme at OUSL, particularly in relation to their satisfaction with the content and accessibility of the study guides.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

As the main aim of this study was to investigate students' perceptions on the content and accessibility of the digital study guides of the PGDE Programme, it sought to address the following research objectives:

- To evaluate the overall perceptions of students with the content of the digital study guides of the PGDE Programme; and

- To assess the overall perceptions of students with the accessibility of the digital study guides of the PGDE Programme.

To achieve these specific objectives, a survey study design was selected. This made it possible to reach a large number of students from various geographical locations and demographic backgrounds (Couper, 2017). The current study was conducted as the preliminary step of a larger study that draws on the responses received to a survey questionnaire administered as a Google form in all three languages — Sinhala, Tamil, and English — to enable students who study the programme in all three languages to respond to the survey. As such, three Google forms were created with one for each language of instruction and the relevant link was shared with the students via their programme WhatsApp group at the end of the academic activities of the study programme. This study used the voluntary response sampling method, which is a type of non-probability sampling technique in which participants are self-chosen and not selected by the researcher on a random basis. The survey consisted of 16 close-ended statements and one open-ended question related to the current study, including demographic data and items related to student satisfaction with the content and accessibility of the study guides. This paper focuses on the responses received in the Tamil-medium Google form during a period of three months (from 01 Feb to 30 April 2024). The number of respondents was 545. The demographic profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 - Demographic Profile of the Survey Respondents

Factor	Details	Percentage of Respondents
Gender	Male	24.8
	Female	75.2
Years of teaching experience	1-5	26.6
	6-10	56.7
	11-15	10.8
	16-20	5.9
Subject taught at school	Tamil language	27.9
	English language	9
	Mathematics	12.9
	Science	13.6
	Social Sciences	31.2
	Aesthetics	5.5

The analysis of quantitative data mainly involved calculating the percentages of the responses to the items while the analysis of qualitative data followed thematic analysis techniques. To safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the respondents' information, the responses and results of the study were recorded anonymously and presented in summary form.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1 Students' perception on the content of the digital study guides

Data collected through a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) provided valuable insights into student satisfaction with the content of the study guides. As depicted in Table 1, the analysis shows that more than half of the respondents (59.1%) agreed that the study guides were clear and easy to understand (Statement 6). Similarly, 49.5% agreed or strongly agreed (16.7%) that the study guides provided appropriate course content and promoted learning (Statement 1). Meanwhile, a significant number of respondents (17%) expressed their disagreement towards the appropriateness of the course content.

Table 2 - Responses for Likert Scale items on student perception on the content of the digital study guides

	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Study guides provide appropriate subject content and promote my learning.	2%	15%	29.5%	49.5%	16.7%
2	The sessions in the study guides of each course are appropriate and facilitated my learning.	2%	5%	30.8%	49.7%	13.8%
3	The online activities provided in the study guides are appropriate for my learning.	3.9%	8.3%	39.3%	40.4%	8.1%
4	The offline activities provided in the study guides are appropriate and facilitated my learning.	2%	5.7%	37.1%	44.9%	10.53%
5	The learning activities in the study guide required critical thinking, which facilitated my learning.	3.5%	10.3%	36.5%	40.9%	8.8%
6	The study guides were very clear and easy to understand.	1.8%	8.1%	30.9%	43.1%	16%

Further, the respondents expressed positive perceptions on statements 3 and 4 about the activities in the study guide. In comparison to offline activities (54.62%), online activities in

the study guides received slightly less positive feedback. 48.5% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the online activities were appropriate. This suggests that there might be room for improvement in the online activities provided in the study guides. In addition, a considerable number of respondents (13.8%) provided a negative response to statement 5, suggesting that students had mixed feelings on the extent to which the activities promoted their critical thinking skills and facilitated their learning. Overall, the findings indicated that the respondents were generally positive about the content of the digital study guides.

4.2 Students' perception on the accessibility of the digital study guides

The analysis of data revealed that the respondents found the study guides fairly easy to use and navigate. As indicated in Table 3, a high proportion (60.3%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they found it easy to use the study guides for learning (Statement 1) with a very small percentage disagreeing (10.1%) with the statement. Similarly, more than half of the respondents (63.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they could quickly understand how to study with the study guides (Statement 2). The functionality of links within the study guides received mixed responses. While a significant portion of the respondents (45.8%) found that the links had helpful descriptions (Statement 3), a nearly equal proportion were neutral (37.3%) while 17.3% disagreed with this aspect. Statement 4 regarding links opening in new windows received a considerable number of negative responses with more than 30% of students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This suggests that there might be some issues with the user friendliness of the link interface.

Students appear to have positive perception towards the technical aspects and resource variation in the study guides. Of the respondents, 51.4% agreed or strongly agreed that the technical tools were good, and the course content was easy to understand (Statement 6). It is noteworthy that a higher percentage (52.9%) of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the study guides included a variety of learning resources to appeal to different learning styles (Statement 7).

Table 3 - Responses for Likert Scale items on students' perceptions on the accessibility of the digital study guides

	Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I find it easy to use the study guides for my learning.	2.2%	7.9%	29.5%	46.5%	13.8%
2	I quickly understand how to study with the study guides.	1.5%	4.4%	30.2%	49.2%	14.7%

3	The links in the study guides had helpful descriptions and gave information about what was in them.	4.6%	12.7%	37.3%	36.2%	9.6%
4	The links in the study guides for essential/additional readings quickly opened in new windows.	10.3%	19.9%	33.8%	10.3%	5.9%
5	The interactive stuff in the additional readings helped me understand the course content better.	3.9%	12.2%	39.6%	37.3%	7%
6	The tech tools in the study guides were good, and it was easy to understand the course.	2.8%	6.8%	39%	40.5%	10.9%
7	The study guides of all courses included varied types of learning resources to appeal to different learning styles.	2%	9.2%	37%	42.2%	10.7%

CONCLUSION

Overall, it could be concluded that students perceive the digital study guides to be effective and user-friendly as they found them to be clear and easy to understand, with appropriate content, and a variety of resources. However, students' negative perceptions towards some of the aspects in the content of the study guides, including online activities and critical thinking, indicate that these aspects appear to receive less attention among students. Hence, it would be beneficial to make adjustments in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) approach adopted in designing the curriculum, and to address certain gaps in the students' learning skills and higher order cognitive skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study reveal several recommendations for practice in improving the digital study guides of the PGDE programme. It is observed that the online learning activities and user-friendliness of the navigation of resources provided in the study guides need to be considered with particular attention. In this regard, it is important to accompany hyperlinks to external resources provided in study guides with more descriptions and the resources should be presented in such a manner that students would be encouraged to refer to them for enriching their self-learning. The link interface should be made user-friendly and easy to navigate. Online learning activities should be made interesting and engaging with clear benefits for the students (eg., providing support in completing assignments), so that they would be motivated to complete them. Critical thinking elements in the study guides need to be introduced in a learner-friendly manner so that students would find them relevant to both their studies and professional practices. Using the scenario-based learning approach is recommended in this regard. The study recommends further investigations including

conducting a similar study on the cohort with students in all three media of instruction, as well as conducting focus group discussions to complement the survey data.

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