

THE DIFFICULTIES RELATED TO DISTANCE LEARNING FACED BY BA DEGREE STUDENTS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, SRI LANKA

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Introduction

Distance learning is a popular learning technique among adult learner populations that desire a high degree of flexibility. The structure of distance learning gives adults the greatest possible control over the time and space of education, but it is not without problems. As proven by previous studies on distance education, although distance learning is not new, it has not received adequate attention among the academic community because of a number of problems (Perraton, 2000). Because there is an increasing tendency to have some higher education off-campus through enhanced technological methods of delivery, being aware of the fundamental problems and overcoming them will be vital to successful implementation of distance programs on a larger scale and at a superior level in the future. Therefore, this study explores the difficulties related to distance learning in order suggest ways of successfully sustaining, attracting, serving, and retaining adult students.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are twofold. Firstly, to identify the difficulties encountered by the students who were following the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Social Sciences, offered by the Department of Social Studies, the Open University of Sri Lanka. Secondly, to identify possible strategies to minimize the difficulties encountered by them.

Methodology

The study area was the Colombo Regional Centre of the Open University of Sri Lanka and this study was carried out during the period of March to August in 2008. Forty one respondents were selected through a purposive sampling. Being a BA Degree student in 2007 /2008 batch and giving

consent to participate were considered as the inclusion criteria. Informal interviews and observations were used to collect qualitative data and they were analysed manually.

Discussion

As revealed in this study, the difficulties encountered by the students, fall into several distinct categories such as lack of institutional, infra-structural facilities, feedback and teacher contact, student support services, alienation and isolation and lack of support from employers.

Improper allocation of class rooms during day schools makes it difficult for to locate their class rooms. The participation of students in day schools varies greatly from single digit to three digits. Thus, the echoing of sound resulting through the occupancy of a very smaller number of students in disproportionately large class rooms interferes with listening and attention. Training the students in the use of technology such as audio-video learning materials, computers, internet and online education was not adequate. The students lose the opportunity to develop their technical competencies and presentation skills during continuous student assessments due to insufficient provision of infrastructure facilities such as Overhead and Multi-Media projectors. Students further reported that they could not get adequate guidance to do oral presentations effectively.

Frequent change of day school academics leads to overlapping as well as inconsistency in the learning process. Students expect prompt and detailed comments on their assignments apart from the grades given as they have less opportunity to learn from their peers. Delay in obtaining feedback is something that frustrates the students. Apart

from that, non availability of reading materials on time and getting information relevant to examinations and results were also challenging since they are mostly dependent on distant communication modes such as telephone, letters and e-mails.

Students perceive a lack of support from employers as some courses do not relate significantly to the skills and knowledge that are needed to their workplace. Perceiving distance learning as something less recognized and inferior to other colleagues' academic qualifications, and preferring and feeling more comfortable with traditional classroom education are also barriers that the students often encounter to remain motivated under the distant education system.

Conclusion and recommendations

Further study of student demographics and their needs will help the adult learner population and institutions develop course materials, design academic programmes and modify teaching and learning techniques appropriately. Socialising them into the distance education system will alleviate their negative inferior attitudes. Understanding and mitigating technology problems are important. These difficulties can be mitigated

through technological methods such as e-mail. Video conferencing and electronic mail can be integrated into the delivery of academic programmes so as to provide the missing interactivity. Further research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand which methods work best in the distance education system.

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