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Original Paper

Profile of Distance Learners in the Open University of Sri Lanka

Doluweera, D. G. S. K.[1*]

[1] The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka

[*] Doluweera, D. G. S. K., The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Independent Sri Lanka has been making efforts ever since 1948 to expand the provision of educational opportunities to her citizenry. Several committees and commissions were set up for this purpose. There recommendations along with the deliberations at the higher levels of policy planning for the country have led to the introduction of several innovative practices in education. One such innovation is "distance education". Conventional face-to-face education is teaching or teacher centered, while distance education is learning or learner centered. It is so because if education is to function as a means of social enlistment and democratization, it cannot but be learner centered. And again, if we accept education to be a life long activity, an activity that constantly engages learners in updating their information and skills, it has to be learner centered.

The objectives of the study were: identification of personal characteristics of the distance learners; investigation of the heterogeneity of the students; investigation of the salient trends between the success rates and the student personal and educational characteristics of Sri Lankan distance student population and Identification of the needs and aspirations of distance learners.

Therefore, a draft copy of a questionnaires were distributed to a pilot sample of 100 students selected at random from Degree programmes of 2012/2013 academic year. The responses of the student sample was obtained and served as a data source for the pilot study. The data set obtained from the pilot study was subjected to the Reliability analysis (Cronbach, 1951). The reliability coefficient, i.e., Cronbach's alpha (α) which indicates the suitability of the questionnaire for the purpose and the higher values (α≥0.50) often considered as an acceptability of the questionnaire. The value obtained for the draft questionnaire was 97% (0.9692). The sample population included 1818 completed questionnaires. Most of the students were in the sample population were Buddhists 85%. Age limit of the students were 26-29 78%.

Female students exceed the male students 89%. Unmarried students exceeds the married students 76%. Most of the students were employed 86%. Their nature of employment was 56% private companies and 44% work in government departments. Most of the OUSL learners spend their own course fees that is 67%. The results obtained from this study is useful for the course developers and policy makers when developing courses and implementing policy decisions. When interviewing Students they requested to have study area to do group studies. During holidays in many regional and study centers, students do not have sufficient space to peer group interaction. The students have to be provided study areas and self-explanatory course material when the course material is self-explanatory, students can do their studies on their own. If not students have to be provided OER material as supplementary material.

Keywords

support services, delivery, success

1. Introduction

Independent Sri Lanka has been making efforts ever since 1948 to expand the provision of educational opportunities to her citizenry. Several committees and commissions were set up for this purpose. There recommendations along with the deliberations at the higher levels of policy planning for the country have led to the introduction of several innovative practices in education. One such innovation is "distance education". Conventional face-to-face education is teaching or teacher centered, while distance education is learning or learner centered. It is so because if education is to function as a means of social enlistment and democratization, it cannot but be learner centered. And again, if we accept education to be a lifelong activity, an activity that constantly engages learners in updating their information and skills, it has to be learner centered.

How can a system of education be learner centered unless it is aware of learner concerns; unless it knows what the learner needs and what the problem are; unless it knows his/her attitudes are. Obviously, if the system of distance education is, to flourish in a country, if it is to be socially relevant, and pedagogically effective, it needs to be well informed about the learner concerns.

Distance Education has become one of the principal mode as an alternative method of course delivery being used by colleges and universities as they expand access to higher education at both the national and international level. Its characteristic is that technology is used to bridge the instructional gap (Willis, 1993) between the instructor and students who are removed from direct, immediate, physical contact (Hassenplug & Harnish, 1998). Through avenues such as distance education, individuals are able to improve their social and economic well being as well as to raise their educational attainment level. The increasing international interest in open and distance learning and the subsequent expansion of the respective institutions and programmers is a most remarkable development in the field of education and training of recent years. There seems to be no doubt that open and distance learning is in a process of establishing itself as an integral part of educational delivery systems all over the world.

As has been pointed out by Holmberg (1995), there "is no evidence to indicate that distance students should be regarded as a homogeneous group"; however, many distance students do share broad demographic and situational similarities that have often provided the basis for profiles of the "typical" distance learner in higher education. Characteristics included in such a profile have varied, but generally have reflected some combination of demographic and situational variables such as age, gender, ethnic background, disability, location, and life roles.

Although the methods of reporting student ages vary from study to study, researchers agree that distance education students are, on average, older than typical undergraduate students. A study of students enrolled in telecourses at four representative (urban, suburban, and rural). U.S. higher education institutions reported a median age of 36 (Hezel & Dirr, 1991). Citing studies from three decades, Holmberg (1995) has stated that the 25-35 age group seems to be the largest in most organizations.

1.1 Literature Review

Most reports in the literature focusing on the participation of students from various ethnic groups are program descriptions, rather than comparative studies. Although research studies rarely report the percentages of participants from various ethnic backgrounds (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Pugliese, 1994), they generally do not compare these with the percentages of the same groups within the population of traditional students. As a result, making generalizations about the relative participation of ethnic minorities in distance education is difficult. However, there is some evidence, largely qualitative and subjective, that distance education is a particularly appealing way for students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups to enter higher education. For many of these students, courses and programs delivered at a distance are an accessible avenue for upward mobility. Satyanarayana (2000) states, though distance study is mainly a form of independent study, it is not and should not be sentenced to solitary confinement. Learners of the distance learning system, therefore always need various types of support services, i.e., academic, administrative, informative, personal and motivational to continue their learning smoothly and effectively. They require support services in different stages of their learning, such as in the pre-entry stage, during the learning period and even after completing studies. The institution should make every effort to ensure that appropriate support is available to students as and when they need it. He also showed that the learners had to spend the vast majority of their study time in their homes or the place of work, and they had needed regular ongoing support. This might best be provided through interpersonal contacts with tutors, and fellow students—with these being sustained through such mechanisms as telephone contacts, telephone conferencing and local meetings (Melton, 2003). According to Subbaiah (2007), the student support services branch is the backbone of the ODL system as it takes care of learner from entry to exit. It is a collective process from pre-entry counseling to exit (Satyanarayana, 2004). The most important services, which have been identified, are information regarding admission, choosing of the optional courses, academic counselling, delivery of self-learning materials, etc. Naidu (2007) has rightly pointed out that the effectiveness of an Open

University and Distance Learning Institute can be significantly judged by measuring the expectation of satisfaction level of its students regarding the services provided by the organization. Shah (2007) laid emphasis on support services provided through Regional and Study Centres which may play a primary role in helping the learners and providing them ample opportunities to contact with the academic counselors to resolve their difficulties in the study as well as in minimizing the gap between conventional mode and distance mode. A study conducted by Doluweera, Somaratne and Biswas (2010) revealed mixed responses from the students of open university of Sri Lanka with regard to print and audio-video components of course materials. More attention needs to be given to improve these components the authors suggested.

Usually, distance education has attracted students whose geographic distance from a higher education institution discouraged or prevented enrollment in on-campus classes (Gibson & Graff's, 1992). However, in many institutions the "typical" distance learner is no longer bound to place. There is a trend that students in close geographical proximity to traditional educational institutions are choosing distance study not because it is the only alternative, but rather because it is the preferred alternative.

In addition to playing the role of student, most distance learners also fill the roles of worker and spouse. A number of studies reporting characteristics of distance learners have documented the extent of this trend (St. Pierre & Olsen, 1991).

There are number of research attempting to measure the relationship of particular demographic characteristics to student success—as measured by levels of persistence and/or achievement—has resulted in often contradictory conclusions. Some studies have reported no correlation between these outcomes and specific demographic variables such as gender (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Fjortoft, 1996), ethnic background (Dille & Mezack, 1991), or age (Powell, Conway, & Ross, 1990; Gibson & Graff, 1992). Other studies suggest that certain demographic variables, perhaps not in and of themselves but rather as the markers of an accompanying set of generalized characteristics, are related to student success and/or satisfaction. For example, several researchers reporting a positive relationship between success and students' age (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Souder, 1994) have explained the higher levels of success for older students on the basis of the increased maturity, self-discipline, life experience, and financial responsibility for their educations that are likely to characterize older students. Additionally, older students are more likely to have higher levels of education at the time of enrollment, another factor which has been correlated with success (Dille & Mezack, 1991; Gibson & Graff, 1992).

Higher success rates among female distance education students have been related to (1) the lower proportion of women working full time outside the home, (2) the higher rates at which women access institutional support structures, (3) the potentially higher level of motivation that might operate among women, who more often work in occupational sectors in which career advancement is closely tied to academic upgrading, and (4) the appeal of the distance format to woman who must integrate education into lives characterized by multiple roles (Ross & Powell, 1990; Powell, Conway, & Ross, 1990; Robinson, 1992). Ahmed (2009) laid stress on the Short Message Service facilities of Mobile

technology by which instant communication should be made with the learners, Not only that, the message can be saved and reviewed. It is cheaper than postal communication. Besides, 95% of learners have mobile phone for themselves. This technology may be extensively used for quick information delivery.

Amaneddine (2009) had proposed a model to overcome the troubles of learners living in rural areas where there is insufficient access through the internet. The idea is based on the integration of a geographic information system, an e-learning management system and the short message service which has been developed ad tested at the Arab Open University in Lebanon. The result is positive. The significant development was observed in the area of communication.

Chibambo (2009) presented his experience of using mobile phone technology in supporting Open and Distance Learning in Malawi. It is very useful in delivering student support services on tutorials, counselling and guidance and so on. Besides, cell phones do indeed support Open and Distance Learning learners through participation, registration, completion and cohort socialization among others.

Famuyiwa (2009) and Satya Sundar Sethy (2009) gave their support in favour of extensive use of mobile technology for enhancing support services.

However, there is a growing need in such studies in the developing countries. Especially for a country having different ethnic composition, geographical regions and also cultural composition, India might need more and more studies on the personal and educational characteristics of the distance learners. Therefore, it is believed that the present proposed research will throw light on such under-studies areas of the distance education in Sri Lanka as a developing country.

1.2 Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

1) Identification of personal characteristics of the distance learners.
2) Investigation of the heterogeneity of the students.
3) Identification of the needs and aspirations of distance learners.
4) Investigation of the salient trends between the success rates and the student personal and educational characteristics of Sri Lanken distance student population.

The findings of the this study will: (a) provide vital information to course designers and administrators in distance educational institutes in the developing countries, (b) use to build up a student profile which could be use for comparison of regional, national and international scales, (c) provide key information for policy makers in distance education and for politicians for implementation of the recommendations made by policy makers.

2. Methodology

The survey method were used by issuing a questionnaire (Annex I) which includes the following aspect of the student population.

i. General information,

ii. Reasons for selecting distance mode of education,

iii. Aspirations,

iv. Learning or study habits and study skills,

v. Study circumstances.

It has been well-known that the draft questionnaire should be administered to a pilot sample to assure increase reliability, validity and practicability of the questionnaire (Oppenheim, 1992; Morrison, 1993; Wilson & Mclean, 1994; Ritchie, 2003; Ritchie et al., 2003).

Therefore, a draft copy of a questionnaire was distributed to a pilot sample of 100 students selected at random from Degree programmes of 2012/2013 academic year. The responses of the student sample was obtained and served as a data source for the pilot study. The data set obtained from the pilot study was subjected to the Reliability analysis (Cronbach, 1951). The reliability coefficient, i.e., Cronbach's alpha (α) which indicates the suitability of the questionnaire for the purpose and the higher values, ($\alpha \geq 0.50$) often considered as an acceptability of the questionnaire. The value obtained for the draft questionnaire was 97% (0.9692) and it was decided to use the draft copy of the questionnaire as the final version.

The population and sample size of the study was 2000 undergraduate students of the OUSL the questionnaire could be considered as reliable enough to distribute to the selected students sample. The data gathered from the study were analysed by the use of SPSS 19 and the Minitab package.

3. Results & Discussions

Table 1. Canter Wise Distribution of the Students in the Sample Population

Name of the Regional/Study Centre	BSc	B.Tec	B Ed	BA in social studies	Total NO.
COLOMBO	327	312	32	152	823
KANDY	187	129	122	14	452
MATARA	51	79	20	17	167
ANURADAPURA	40	32	15	20	107
BATICALOA	8	7	5	2	22
JAFFNA	27	22	39	41	120
RATHNAPURA	2	4	3	3	12
KURUNAGALA	26	18	7	5	57
GAMPAHA	15	12	6	5	58
TOTAL NO	683	615	249	259	1818

According to the Table 1, 1818 Completed Questionnaires were received.

For the Triangulation of Data an in-depth interviews were conducted for twenty students in each programme interweaved. Responses were more or less same as the interview responses.

Most of the students were in the sample population were Buddhists 85%. Age limit of the students were (26-29) 78%. Female students exceed the male students 89%. Unmarried students exceeds the married students 76%. Most of the students were employed 86%.

Their nature of employment was 56% private companies and 44% work in government departments.

Most of the OUSL learners spend their own course fees that is 67%. The highest level of qualifications when entering the OUSL were the G...C., .E (AL) qualifications.

Most of the learners had their early education in Sinhala 89% or Tamil medium 10%. Most of the students have TV, Radio, and news papers like facilities at home. Many students stay within the (10-25) km range. Mode of traveling of the open University students were the public transport (76%). Available study time for students per day were 3 hours.

Reason for registering at OUSL was to get the promotion (68%) and professional growth (56%). The reason for selecting the distance mode of education was they missed the traditional university education due to competition (.85%). Most of the students take part in group study during holidays (70%). They study for the continuous assessment tests and final examinations (80%).

4. Conclusion

The results obtained from this study is useful for the course developers and policy makers when developing courses and implementing policy decisions. When interviewing Students they requested to have study area to do group studies. During holidays in many Regional and study canters students do not have sufficient space to peer group interaction. The students have to be provided study areas and self-explanatory course material. The services of the Open University have to be decentralized and Regional and study canter facilities to students have to be improved. When the course material is self-explanatory, students can do their studies on their own. If not students have to be provided OER material as supplementary material. The Learners must be provided with sufficient space and facilities for group studies in the Colombo Regional Center (seating facilities, etc.).

Questionnaire using for data collection (Annex 1)

Profile of Distance Learners in Sri Lanka

(A Research Study undertaken by Mrs. D. G. S. K. Doluweera)

Dear student,

We seek your kind cooperation in improving the quality of the study material and the student support services of the university. Therefore please fill in the following questionnaire and return it to us.

Thank you

Mrs. D. G. S. K. Doluweera

Questionnaire

General Information

Please write the answer or tick appropriate box where relevant.

1. Religion: Buddhist□ Hindu□ Muslim □ Christian □ Others □

2. Age: <25□ 26-39□ 40-54□ >55□

3. Sex (Gender): Male □ Female □

4. Are you married? Yes □ No □

5. Are you employed? Yes □ No □

If the answer is "No" for question No.6, please go to Q. No. 8.

6. What is the nature of your employment?

i) Government department □ ii) Corporation/Board □ iii) Private companies □

iv) Other (please specify) .....

7. Who spends for your studies?

i. Parents □ ii. Spouse (Husband / Wife) □ iii. By yourself □ iv. Any others □

8. Highest level of qualification attained

Intermediate □ I.T.I. □ Secondary School Certificate □ Eligibility Test □

9. What is the medium of instruction of your studies?

Your mother language □ English □

10. Do you have the following facilities at home?

T.V. □ Radio □ Satellite/Cable □ News papers □

11. What is the distance between the study centre and your home? ……. Km

12. Mode of travelling

By bus □ By train □ On foot □ Any other □

13. Available study time per day:

2-4 hours □ 5-7 hours □ More than 7 hours □ More than 1 0 hours □

Aspirations

14. What are the reasons for registering in the OUSL?

For promotion in work/increment in salary □ To apply or qualify for a new position □

For an interest □ For professional growth □

Other please state ……..

15. Why did you opt for the distance mode of Education?

I missed the traditional university education due to competition □

I was unable to go to school because of the lack of financial assistance □

I was unable to go to school because of the long-term illness □

Any other …….

16. What are your objectives in following this programme?

To acquire personal skills □ To acquire paper qualifications □

To obtain employment □ Any other ……

17. Do you take part in group study? Yes □ No □

18. How often do you study?

Regularly □ Study only for the assignments □

Study only for the examinations □ Any other .....

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