

AN OUTLOOK OF ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

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Introduction

Distance teaching and learning become an increasingly more attractive option for two main reasons. One is availability of technology as well as its continuous expansion of conceptual powers and connectivity while costs are decreasing. And second there is a growing need for updating onsite learning and training in a new and modern world (Judith, 2002). Along with these new trends distance learning institutions try to change their teaching and study methods accordingly and searching new ways of exploiting these technological tools. Online learning offers new opportunities for both educators and learners to enrich their teaching and learning experience through virtual environment that support not just the delivery but also the exploration and application of information and the promotion of new knowledge. According to Holms and Garner (2006) online learning is online access to learning resources anywhere and anytime. The meaning of open learning as a learning opportunity provides students with as much choice and control as possible over course content, learning strategies and learning resources.

This study will shed light on several aspects of Sri Lanka's Online Distance Learning (ODL). At institutional level the study will help to enhance strategic path that the

University of Peradeniya should adapt at larger scale in order to gain competitive advantage. At program level this study will provide basis for making decisions that strength the process and practices of ODL for constant progress and to improve the quality of the course. We can evaluate individual learners within their different profiles and then can address their needs and expectations. Further study will contribute to revitalize the teaching - learning process and the debate about conventional verses online learning.

Objectives

The challenge in ODL is to find ways of providing learning experiences which will cater to student's diversity in learning styles, goals needs and approaches. The research focused on identifying students' characteristics, analyzing online learning behavior of students, testing relative effectiveness of learning resources delivered via screen, identifying learning habits of students and recognizing the areas needing attention.

Methodology

The sample of 140 BBA online students from the University of Peradeniya was served as respondents of this study. These students have six months to one and six months experience in online learning and they were following the certificate and diploma level

courses. Main instrument of data gathering was structured questionnaire while secondary data was gathered from administrative reports, student's personal profiles and from their activity reports. Based on the nature of this study descriptive analysis was mainly used percentages, means were data analysis tools.

Results and Analysis

The study considered about students' personal profiles and 80% of them were unmarried and below 30 years in age. Employability of them were recorded as 65% fulltime workers, 23% self employed, 8% self employed and 4% unemployed. Motivational factor of selecting this program was mainly accessibility in real life settings. Requirement of current job or preparations of future job were the reasons of following the online course for 59% of students. Analysis of data suggested that learners were not taking full advantages of various opportunities of online interaction provided in the context. They have graded main text, self assessment and Face to Face sessions as very important tools and they were reluctant to pay much attention towards the provided additional resources and interactive tools.

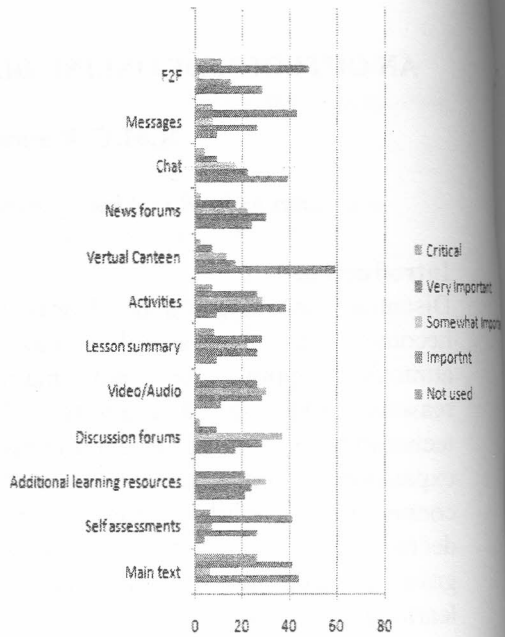


Fig. 1. Students' idea about online tools

It was identified that the virtual presence of tutor/mentors and face to face meetings were highly influenced for the student's satisfaction. Findings summarized that 69% students were using both printed and online mode for their studies while 4% used to be fully online. Printed mode of study also evidenced and 27% students were used to use printed materials for their studies. NODES Access Centers were used by 1% of students and 91% of them have internet access from their homes. Most of these students found time for logging online only after all the daily responsibilities have been paid to and in the evening for 1 to 2 hours.

Table 01: Study habits of students

Learning Habits	Percentage (%)
Hourly Study Habits	
2-3 hrs	5
1-2 hrs	50
Less than one hr	22
Weekly Study Habits	
Once a week	43
2-3 times a week	41
4-6 times a week	13
Time Period of Study	
Before going to work	4
Immediately after work	13
During break time	4
During work	2
Just after dinner	34
After home routings	9
No special schedule	30

Perceived barriers to online learning were very personal and 33% students faced difficulties with job responsibilities and 22% and 26% students recorded respectively home responsibilities and other professional courses they were following as barriers.

Further findings stated that languages and qualitative subjects were well fixed with this mode than the quantitative subjects considering students' preference and inquiries regarding the each subject.

Conclusion and Discussion

It was evident that formal higher education would not a lifetime experience in Sri Lanka and it was still a choice among young people.

Learning became more part time and more concerned with enhancing work

skills or business performance than gaining formal qualifications. Institutional and promotional strategies as well as course design should address job requirements and should responsive to students' need. Providing a variety of opportunities for interaction for online students might not be necessary and flexible online availability of facilitators can be adjusted for better cost and disciplined management. Further findings encourage languages and qualitative subjects for online mode of delivery while more advanced technical and instructional enrichment for quantitative subjects. In order to keep up with the ever increasing demand for online education hurdles should be removed and flexibility should be maintained further.

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