Problems Faced by OUSL Study Centres Then and Now

Lalith Ranjan Gonsalkorala

Senior Lecturer, Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education, Faculty of Education,
the Open University of Sri Lanka

Abstract: **Similar to many other Open Universities, the Open University of Sri Lanka is concerned about the student satisfaction. One major reason for the concern is that dissatisfaction leads to dropping out of students. Undoubtedly high rates of dropouts mean high wastage of resources. Therefore these institutions are concerned about student satisfaction and a common approach to ensure satisfaction is to provide Student Support Services (SSS). The expectation of the institutions is to increase student satisfaction so that success rates would increase. A strategy adopted by the OUSL similar to many other Open Universities is to operate centers in order to facilitate the provision of SSS. At the same time, the centers themselves face problems in the provision of SSS and these in turn can affect student satisfaction. The main aim of this study is to compare the problems faced by the study centres in the provision of SSS in 2007 and 2017. The study also aimed to identify the SSS currently provided by the study centres, the current problems faced by them in the provision of SSS and to make suggestions to minimize the problems. In 2007, 4 study centres were selected for the study out of 17 study centres that existed at that time through random sampling. In 2017, 6 study centres were selected out of 26 study centres existing currently through random sampling. The instruments, used to collect data were a questionnaires and an interview schedule. The analysis of data was done qualitatively.**

Keywords: **Comparing Problems 2007-2017, Open University of Sri Lanka Student, satisfaction Study, centres, Student support, services, Suggestions.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The Open and Distance learning (ODL) commenced in Sri Lanka in the mid-1970s. In early 1980s the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was established as the only national university for ODL in Sri Lanka. The university has by now completed more than 35 years of existence and at present caters to a student population of around 45000 by offering more than 60 programmes of study, ranging from foundation and certificate programmes to post graduate degree programmes. The study system of the OUSL is the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system, which involves a substantial amount of self-learning on the part of the students.

However the Sri Lanken students are more used to the traditional way of learning. They are used to being taught by the teachers rather than engage in self-learning. Therefore those who study in the distance mode as students of the OUSL face problems in coping up with their studies. Some of them become dissatisfied with the facilities provided for their studies and tend to dropout. The considerable rate of dropouts from the programmes of study conducted by the OUSL is an indicator of this situation.

The OUSL therefore, just as many other open universities and distance educational institutions all over the world, is very concerned about student satisfaction on facilities provided for their studies. Open and distance learners face many problems during their studies due to various reasons and it has been widely accepted that they need support to overcome

those problems. Otherwise they may become dissatisfied and even dropout from their studies. This is especially relevant to those who are first time distance learners. This is because decrease of student satisfaction has been identified as a major factor, which leads to dropout of students. Undoubtedly this is wastage of resources both from the institutional point of view and the students' point of view. Therefore in order to minimize this situation Open Universities and other distance educational institutions all over the world are constantly engaged in efforts of increasing student satisfaction on facilities provided for their studies. The main thrust of these efforts is to provide support services to students so that their studies can be facilitated and that their satisfaction about studying can be improved. The OUSL is also no exception to this and provides support services to the students. The main purpose of providing support services is to increase student satisfaction. In order to provide student support services (SSS), the OUSL employs many mechanisms or strategies.

One of the mechanisms or strategies employed by the OUSL for that purpose is the maintenance of centres in various regions of the country. In ODL, one barrier, the students face is the barrier of distance. By maintaining centers which are spread all over the island this barrier has been lowered to a considerable extent. Currently The OUSL has thirty five centers in operation to provide support services to the students. The centres are mainly of two types. They are the Regional centres (8 in number) and the study centres (27 in number). However in the process of providing various support services to the students the centers themselves face problems. The problems faced by the centers themselves may again affect student satisfaction. Therefore in 2007, that is 10 years ago, the present researcher investigated the problems faced by the centers of the OUSL among other things. Now after 10 years it was felt appropriate to find the current situation as well as to see whether there are new problems or issues in relation to the provision of SSS.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review conducted for the study done in 2007 and suitably revised to match the objectives of the present study is presented in the following sections under three sub headings. The sub headings are student support services, problems faced by students due to weaknesse in the provision of SSS and Problems faced by centres in the provision of SSS.

Student Support Services:

Comacho (1996) in a study of barriers to completion of a distance education programme recommended support for all students to prevent dropout. Holmberg (1995) stated that all institutions make all kind of efforts to support students in order to prevent dropout. It is actually seen that many open universities and other open and distance educational institutions provide student support services (SSS) to their students. UNESCO (1990) stated that most distance education systems provide support for students. According to Raghunath (1994) a mechanism adopted by most open universities and other distance educational institutions to facilitate the provision of SSS was to operate centres. For example Mirja & Singh (2014) stated that to provide effective and efficient student support service, IGNOU has set up a number of study centers all over the country. Several researchers have focused their attention on the centres of open universities and other distance educational institutions. Among them were Gooly (1991), Keegan (1994), and Pluist (2001). The studies of Manjulika and Reddy (1995) and Tait (20000 have shed more light on various aspects of study and regional centres such as importance, needs, role and functions.

Problems faced by students due to weaknesses in the provision of SSS:

Roberts et al (1991) found that the return rate of unmarked assignments and the quality of feedback comments in assignments were very alarming. Dillon et al[4] who based their study on Oklohoma Televised Instruction System also reported poor library resources as one of the problems faced by students. They were also concerned about inadequate physical facilities. Other researchers such as Manjlika and Reddy (1995), Selvam (1999), Gupta (2000), and Sharma (2001) also investigated the problems faced by students due to the weaknesses in the provision of SSS. Their findings were similar to those stated above while some other problems were also highlighted by them. In the OUSL context, Jayathissa (1999) and Lekamge et al (1999) conducted research in this area and identified some problems, which students face. One of the main findings of both studies was the failure to provide course materials on time. All these problems faced by students in obtaining support in turn can affect their satisfaction.

Problems faced by Centres in the provision of SSS:

Holmberg (1995) emphasized the importance of student satisfaction. Various other researchers also focused their attention on student satisfaction. In research literature, some factors identified as affecting student satisfaction were institutional factors.

The ODL institutions themselves cause these factors and the students have no control over them.

Problems faced by the centres in the provision of SSS have been identified as institutional factors which affect student satisfaction. Manjulika and Reddy (1995) and Lockwood and Gooly (2001) among others studied about the problems faced by the centres. However there seems to be a gap in the research literature as no worthwhile studies were found on the effect of the problems faced by centres on student satisfaction.

Objectives

The objectives formulated for the current study are stated below.

1. To identify the SSS currently provided to the students.

2. To compare the problems/issues faced in 2007 and 2017 by the study centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS.

3. Identify the new problems/issues currently faced by the Study Centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS.

4. To make suggestions to minimize the current problems/issues faced by the centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research design of the study was the longitudinal design. A longitudinal research refers to the collection of data from the same unit/s (e.g., the same person/s) at two or more different points in time. http://methods.sagepub.com/reference/encyc-of-epidemiology/n270.xml accessed on 06.08.2017.

The population and the sample:

In this study, the population was the centres of the OUSL. This paper present the data based on the study centres only. All centres of the OUSL form the population of the study. As this paper deals only with the study centres of the OUSL, all study centres could be identified as the target population of the study.

In 2007, when the first study was conducted, the population of OUSL study centres consisted of 17 centres. During the last ten years, many changes had occurred in the OUSL centre system. Some study centres that existed in 2007 had been upgraded to the status of regional centres while several new study centres have been established over the years. Therefore it was not possible to include the same centres that were in the sample 10 years ago. As at present there are 26 study centres. In 2007, 4 study centres were selected randomly for the study out of 17 study centres. Therefore in order to maintain the same proportion for the present study as well, 6 study centres were selected using the same sampling technique out of 26 study centres.

Data collection instruments and procedures:

The instruments used to collect data for the study consisted of a questionnaires and a semi structured interview schedule. A questionnaire was e-mailed to the Assistant Directors (ADs) in charge of the study centres selected. The 6 study centres were Ampara, Bandarawela, Gampaha, Killinochchi, Puttalam and Rathnapura. Telephone Interviews using the semi-structured interview schedule were conducted with the Assistant Directors to obtain more information and clarifications on the information already received through e mail.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Objective No 1: Identify the student support services currently provided by the OUSL study centres

Issuing of course materials, conducting day schools, other face-to-face sessions and practical sessions, library facilities, counseling, assignments, CA tests and examinations, facilities for group study, providing information, providing welfare facilities, issuing and receiving applications, registration and re-registration of students, financial assistance, keep records, community relations, raising awareness of the public of OUSL programmes.

Objective No 2: To compare the problems faced in 2007 and 2017 by the study centres of the OUSL in the provision of student support services

The data related to the comparison of problems faced by the study centres of the OUSL at the two points of time are presented in table No 1 below.

<div align="center">Table No 1: comparison of the problems faced between 2007 and 2017 by the OUSL study centres.</div>

Support Service Component	Problems faced by centres in 2007 (the problems existed 10 years ago)	Current situation (2017) of problems faced by centres in 2007
Issue of Course Materials	Not received in time, not in adequate quantities, errors in books, more books than needed, no course materials, students obtaining year round, no stock maintenance	Sending more or less number of books than needed, students obtaining year round, errors in books, Not received in time, course material not revised
Practical Sessions	Poor lab conditions, equipment not enough, old equipment, problems of repairing equipment, no training to staff, outdated computer courses, frequent power failures, high Internet bills	Study centres have only computer labs. A few study centres do not have computer labs. Some problems remain unsolved although the Regional Education Service has introduced new methods for repairing equipment some of those methods are not practical Some problems such as outdated computer equipments (Panora Machines) are available in center which cannot be used. No lab available, Poor lab conditions (No A/C, No proper furniture), equipment not enough, outdated computer courses, Outdated/old computers. Problems of repairing faulty equipment.
Library Facilities	Not enough books, no new publications, no periodicals, lack of AV materials, lack of staff no photo copy machine, not lending, lack of seating, no staff table, no proper facilities, AV cassettes destroyed by fungus, irregularity of course materials coming to the centre.	No new publications, no periodicals, lack of seating. No library available, no photo copy machine given. No Library at Study Centre as no proper facilities. No proper library, no lending. No space for a library, library books stored in cupboards which are decaying- (request for new cupboards rejected)
Assignments	Submission dates not sent, marking schemes not in time, errors in assignments, delay in marking, no uniform instructions, late submissions	submission dates not sent, delay in marking Marking schemes not received in time. Some submission dates not received at all. Ex- Engineering),
Selection tests, CA tests & final examinations	Several at the same time, eligibility lists delayed, timetables delayed, revision test marking schemes delayed, not enough question papers, question paper packets coming without informing	question paper packets coming without informing Eligibility lists delayed, timetables delayed. R*evision test marking schemes of English courses delayed in coming.* For some CA tests the exact No of question papers according to the student number are received. If a student from some other centre comes to sit the test, an employee has to be sent outside to obtain photo copies as

ISSN 2394-9686

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning
Vol. 4, Issue 4, pp: (18-25), Month: July – August 2017, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

		there is no photocopy machine.
Counselling	Difficulty to contact, nobody responsible, no coordination between sections, inadequate academic staff, wrong counseling at registration, negative attitudes, weekend weekday system error	Difficulty to contact academics in the main campus. Nobody responsible, no coordination between sections in the main campus, inadequate academic staff, wrong counseling at registration, negative attitudes, weekend weekday system error Lack of permanent staff to do counselling for prospective applicants. No academic staff members
Group Study facilities	No classrooms, weekend's problems, misuse by students (couples)	No classrooms We are not in a position to allocate our classrooms during weekends due to congestion.
Welfare Facilities	Poor quality canteen, no canteen, no place for students to eat, no sports facilities, no hostels, inadequate furniture in hostels	No canteen, In some centres no place for students to eat. no such welfare facilities No common room for students
Receiving Programme information	Not receiving, delay in receiving, getting information over the phone difficult, irregular receiving, bad departments, weaknesses of providing	Getting information over the phone from the main campus difficult Not receiving, delay in receiving, Irregularity in receiving, bad departments, cause weaknesses in providing information to students

The interviews conducted with the Assistant Directors of the study centres generated more information related to various support services which are presented below.

Regarding the i*ssue of course materials some ADs agreed that it has improved a lot. According to them different mechanisms have been adopted, since recently to boost the dispatch activities and also Stock maintenance was done in a proper way now*

Thanks to the developed Management Information system, everything is sent through E mail which is speedy and reliable (e.g. assignment marking schemes). All instructions and notices are also sent similarly. For repairing faulty equipment such as computers different procedures are adopted although they are not always productive.

The comparison of the problems/issues that existed in 2007 and now at present in 2017 reveal that in the provision of many support services, problems and issues still exist. The reasons for this state of affairs may be due to the increased complexity of the University. During these 10 years the student population has almost doubled, the number of courses and programmes conducted and the number of centres has very significantly increased. However as per the information collected from the interviews, it was revealed that over the years the University has developed its structures and procedures in order to solve the problems/issues to the extent possible.

Objective No 3: Identify the problems currently faced by the Study Centres of the OUSL in the provision of student support services

<div align="center">Table No 2: the problems currently faced by OUSL study centres in the provision of SSS</div>

Support Service Component	New problems/issues faced by OUSL study centres at present in the provision of SSS
Issue of Course Materials	Issuing outdated course materials without updating them by some departments for some courses. Course materials for some courses which are not conducted at the centre are sent. Storing them is a problem as cupboards and space are limited. Lack of facilities to keep course materials in good condition. No procedure to remove outdated unused course materials.

ISSN 2394-9686

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning
Vol. 4, Issue 4, pp: (18-25), Month: July – August 2017, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Practical Sessions	Unable to start computer based short course due to outdated computers
	All the computer course conducted are outdated and such Certificate courses are not recognized by the government. There are infrastructure problems also.
	Outdated Operating Systems, Software & Computers
Library Facilities	There is a scarcity of journals and other periodicals (especially for the academic staff), who patronizes this library, though on the odd occasion.
Assignments	No new issues
Selection tests, CA tests & final examinations	Takes a long time to release selection test results. Therefore student admissions are too much delayed
	Change of exam time tables. Hope the revised version of the timetable will remain unchanged.
	Delays in informing the final exam schedules. In a short notice it is difficult to do the necessary arrangements (requesting advances for external staff, reservation of exam halls etc.). Rescheduled dates of postponed exams not informed in time (we get the news from the students!)
Counselling	Even though contact numbers of central campus academics are given no one answer the phone calls. AD face many difficulties when there is no academic counselor responding to queries from the centre or students.
Receiving Programme information	Difficult to get common leaflets about programmes to the centre. National level promotion is not enough
Any Other? State of the building *Facilities for Day schools & Exams at the centre*	Gampaha: Condition of the building is going from bad to worse due to poor constructional techniques. Requests and suggestions have already put forward to the relevant authority.
	Kilinochchi: the center is in a developing stage still. There are problems to enroll enough students for the programme because of the lack of the awareness about the University and its programmes, language (English) etc, but some departments don't consider and not come forward to conduct day schools at study centres.
	Rathnapura: No adequate numbers of class rooms. Furniture, old and uncomfortable. Not replacing according to centre's request.
	Most of the schools now refuse to grant exam hall facilities/ class rooms due to various reasons. Either we have to hire from other outside places (they have higher rates!) or centres should be given spacious exam halls
	Puttalam: Not enough multimedia Projectors,
	Not/Late receiving of items which are requested through Procurement Plan.
Visiting Lecturers	Delay in issuing Visiting Lecturers' appointment letters. Even though issued sometimes earlier, the centre copies of such appointments are not received in time and cause payment delays to visiting lecturers**.**

The table No 2 present the data collected for the objective No 3 regarding new problems /issues faced by the study centres in the provision of SSS. It cause concen to find that there are new problems also faced by study centres in the provision of SSS.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The OUSL study centres provide a large number of SSS which include the following: Issuing of course materials, conducting day schools, other face-to-face sessions and practical sessions, library facilities, counseling, assignments, CA tests and examinations, facilities for group study, providing information, providing welfare facilities, issuing and receiving applications, registration and re-registration of students, financial assistance, keep records, community relations, raising awareness of the public of OUSL programmes

Many problems/issues that existed in 2007 faced by the study centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS still exist.

There are some new problems/issues faced by study centres of the OUSL.

The OUSL has been making efforts to minimize the problems/issues as early as possible.

The following recommendations are presented:

To regularly conduct surveys about problems/issues faced by the centres in the provision of SSS and take action to solve them without delay.

Providing deadlines to academic departments to revise and update course materials.

Make periodical course material revisions part of the academic performance appraisals.

Revise and upgrade computer certificate courses conducted by the study centres so that those certificates can obtain state and private sector recognition.

To conduct student satisfaction surveys also periodically.

To conduct more in depth research to identify specific problems/issues faced by centres in the provision of SSS.

The findings of this study would be very useful to the authorities of the Open University of Sri Lanka. Although all efforts are are continuously made by the decision makers to ensure a smooth student support service, the findings of the study shows that many problems that existed a decade earlier are still there. Making use of the new and latest development ICT has it seems contributed to the reduction or solving of some problems but it should be a grave concern to note that some very basic problems especially related to the issue and quality of course materials are being faced by the study centres.

REFERENCES

[1] Comacho, K. (1996). 'Barriers to completion of a nurse-midwifery distance education program' Distance Education (XI) 111-31

[2] Dillon, C. I., Gunawardana, C. N. & Parker, R. (1992). 'Learner support: The critical link in distance education' Distance Education 13(1), 29-45

[3] Gooly, A. (1991). 'Queensland Open Learning Centres- removing the barriers to learning' in Hornblow D & Stevens K (eds), conference paper evaluative report: The learner: proceedings of the 7th annual conference of the distance education association of New Zealand 117-27

[4] Gupta, S. P. (2000). 'Compositions, problems and motivating factors of correspondence course students' Indian journal of Open Learning 9(2), 211-6

[5] Holmberg, B. (1995). Theory and practice of Distance Education London, Routledge

[6] Jayathissa, H. G. (1999). Effects on job satisfaction on delivery of service unpublished thesis PGDM Colombo, OUSL

[7] Kember, D. & Dekkers, J. (1987). 'The role of study centers for academic support in distance education' Distance Education 8 (1), 4-17

[8] Lekamge, G. D., Ranawaka, G., Gunaratna, K. A. R. D. & Jayananda, R. (1999). 'Student satisfaction with OUSL support services' OUSL Journal, 2. 80-92

[9] Lockwood, F. & Gooly, A. (2001). Innovation in Open and Distance learning. London, Kogan Page

[10] Manjulika, S. & Reddy, V. (1995). Distance Education in India – A model for developing countries. New Delhi, Vikkas

[11] Mirja, S. & Singh, S.P. (2014) Effectiveness of Student Support Services Provided by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences Vol 5 No 26 November 2014 p124

[12] Pluist, S. K. (2001). 'Transition to Internet based learning in IGNOU; a lerners perspective' Indian journal of Open Learning. 10(2), 135-49.

[13] Ragunath, K. (1994). Management of Distance Education Delhi, Ajantha

[14] Roborts, D., Boyton, B., Buetes, S. & Dawson, D. (1991). 'Applying Kember's Linear Process Model to distance education at Charls Strut University-Riverina' Distance Education 12(1), 4-83.

[15] Selvam, M. (1999). 'Correlation between level of dissatisfaction and dropout of distance learners; A case study' Indian journal of Open Learning. 8(3), 265-71.

[16] Sharma, M. C. (2001). 'Teacher education through distance mode: An in depth study' Indian journal of Open Learning. 10(2), 193-202

[17] Tait, A. (2000). 'Planning student support for Open and Distance Learning' Open Learning. 15(3), 287-99.

[18] UNESCO, (1990). Handbook on the organization and management of distance education study centers. Bangkok, Unesco principal regional office for Asia and Pacific.

[19] http://methods.sagepub.com/reference/encyc-of-epidemiology/n270.xml accessed on 06.08.2017.