A Case Study of Teachers Coping as Distance Learners at the Open University Malaysia

Latifah Abdol Latif
Open University Malaysia
latifah@oum.edu.my

Ramli Bahroom
Open University Malaysia
ramli@oum.edu.my

Zoraini Wati Abas
Open University Malaysia
zoraini@oum.edu.my

Nik Azlina Nik Yaacob
Open University Malaysia
nikazlina@oum.edu.my

Abstract

Compared with full-time on-campus learners, part-time distance learners are faced with greater challenges as they pursue their higher education. Currently, Open University Malaysia (OUM) has 10,000 teachers out of its 23,000 learners. These teachers are sent by the Ministry of Education under a special contractual programme. Being distance learners, they have to cope with their responsibilities as full-time teachers while at the same time study on a part-time basis. As part of an effort by both OUM and the Ministry to ensure that this group is able to cope with their studies, OUM examined the academic performance of these teachers to see if special measures need to be taken to help them manage their learning effectively. This paper reports on their performances and compares them with those of the learners from the open market. The paper also discusses the issues and challenges faced by this special group of learners, and highlights some of the measures that have been taken to help them improve their academic performances.

Introduction

Open University Malaysia (OUM) was established in the year 2000 as the seventh private university in Malaysia. OUM leverages on the strengths of the first eleven public universities in Malaysia who are its shareholders. By utilizing the resources of these universities, OUM was able to start operation in 2001 and within a short period of two years, establish itself as the main ODL Higher Education provider in the country. The primary role of OUM was to complement that of the public universities in providing higher education to the masses, in line with its motto, "University for All". OUM caters primarily for the working adults. To date, the university's enrollment stands at 23,000, of which almost 90% are working adults. Of these working adults, 10,000 are teachers from the Ministry of Education.

It is the policy of the Malaysian Ministry of Education that all Secondary School teachers have a minimum qualification of a Bachelor's degree. To make it a reality, the Ministry formulated the Graduate Teachers Scheme. To enable a large number of existing teachers to be trained and yet at the same time not be away from their teaching duties, the Ministry together with OUM customized a special Bachelor in Education Programme, in which these teachers will enroll in OUM. Under the first phase of the programme, 18,500 teachers in 6 programmes, namely, Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL), Science, Mathematics, Engineering (Civil, Mechanical and

Electrical) are to be graduated within 4 years. At the time when this study was conducted, 8,910 teachers were enrolled in the above 6 programmes, and the first batch of 2,636 students are expected to graduate by 2006.

At OUM, delivery of its academic programmes is via the blended mode comprising three elements: face-to-face tutorials, online learning and self-managed learning. While the face-to-face tutorials are held once every fortnight, online learning via the myLMS platform takes place throughout the semester. For the self-managed learning, learners are provided with print modules for them to read at their own convenience, are required to go through the online resources, refer to library materials using the digital library facilities and partake in other learning activities as and whenever necessary. Learners are assessed based on tests, assignments, participation in online discussions and final examinations at the end of the semester.

Performance is defined as academic achievement of learners in terms of the overall grades achieved based on the following components:

(a) Continuous Assessment (50%): Test 1 and Test 2, Assignments and Participation in Online Discussions

(b) Final Examination (50%): Part A (MCQ or short answer questions) and Part B (Essay-type questions)

The grading scheme is as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: OUM's Grading Scheme

Status	Marks	Grade	Grade Point
Pass	50 and above	C and above	2.0 and above
Fail	0-49	C-, D+, D & F	Below 2.0
I	Incomplete	-	-
W	Withdraw	-	-

Incomplete is given to learners who do not sit for the prescribed examination due to either (i) medical or humanitarian reasons and/or (ii) due to circumstances beyond the control of the learners.

Withdrawal is when a learner officially withdraws from one or more courses for a particular semester.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the academic performance of the teachers in the said programme. It involves looking at their CGPAs, followed by academic performance in terms of course results; rate of passes, failures, incompletes and withdrawals on a semester basis.

The analysis is a necessary first step to enable us to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. To the teachers, OUM must provide the support services as well as the technological infrastructure to assist them in managing their learning process. In addition, the open and distance learning (ODL) environment poses numerous challenges to the learners which require unique and different learning skills and approaches. In response to the above challenges, OUM needs to take the necessary steps to ensure that these teachers go through a meaningful and successful learning experience. Learners' performance is one of the barometers that indicate the success of OUM efforts.

Review of Related Literature

Learners in open distance learning institutions appear to have more challenges as they try to manage their studies. Typically, distance learners are older than learners in conventional institutions, have other commitments such as families or full-time jobs, need a flexible course schedule and are pursuing a degree in order to get a promotion in their present job or to train themselves for a different career. It is this set of challenges that institutions of higher learning have to understand and provide the necessary as well as effective support to help learners stay on track. In a handbook for distance learners by Virginia Tech's Institute for Distance and Distributed Learning, for learners to succeed

in their pursuit of higher education, they must have good time-management skills, good problem-solving abilities (e.g., be able to solve computer problems on their own), be self-motivated and independent learners, possess the initiative (e.g., they'll ask when they don't understand), and are able to understand expectations (http://www.iddl.vt.edu/handbook/profiles.php)."

In a study by Dass (2001) on 534 distance learning students at Universiti Sains Malaysia, the two greatest challenges indicated by the majority of those surveyed were time management (75.5 percent) and study-related problems (74.9 percent). It is generally perceived that distance learning is convenient but later realized to be time- consuming and more demanding than traditional courses (Tucker, 2003). Thus, it has been reported that fewer than 50 percent of distance-education students finish their courses (Carr, 2000). At the University of Phoenix however, 65 percent of its learners satisfy the requirements to graduate. This is attributed in part due to the university understanding important learner considerations such as the importance of interaction between professor and other learners in the class, hand-holding their students and providing a 24x7 technical support (Martinez, 2003). In short, supporting learners by providing good administrative support is crucial. OUM, for example, provides counseling and motivation courses as well as opportunities to help students develop more effective study skills. An online bulletin for learners, Learner Connexxions, is available to provide some of the support that is missing from the other services provided by OUM.

If it were to be seen to be serious in producing quality graduates, OUM needs to understand what it is doing right and what else needs to be done right. Helping students succeed academically is an important role it has to play. As Pacey and Penney (1995) stressed, the goal in distance education is to "enable the learners and learning rather than to cover content and process students (p. 34)."

Distance learners studying at USM were found to have a problem with the English language courses. As Dass highlighted, the medium of instruction in the Malaysian public education system is Bahasa Malaysia. This was expected to impact the performance of the teacher group of learners as most of them had studied in this medium but were also teaching in this medium. Hence, they are more used to dealing with Bahasa Malaysia compared to the English language.

Methodology

The data used in the study were actual examination results of all courses taken by the teachers enrolled at OUM. These were obtained from the Examination Section. The purpose was to determine the general performance of the learners in terms of passes and failures for each of the courses taken.

For each course, failure was defined as the combined percentages of the Failure (F), Withdrawal (W) and Incomplete (I) grades. The courses were next ranked from the highest to the lowest in terms of their failure rates. Only high-risk courses, defined as those with failures rates of 20% or more were identified.

Based on feedback from learners, tutors, faculty and administrators, possible contributing factors to poor performance (failure) in high-risk courses were identified.

Results and Discussion

Results

Intakes, enrolment and attrition

Table 2 shows the intakes, enrolment and attrition rates for all teachers at OUM starting from the first the March 2002 to the January 2004 cohorts.

Comparison of performance

Table 3 gives the number and the percentage of learners with a cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of less than 2.0. This CGPA is a cumulative average of all GPAs of all courses taken by each individual learner as at January 2004 semester. The results show that the teacher group outperform the other groups with only 5.5% of them with CGPA<2.0.

Performance by semester

Table 4 shows the total number of courses registered (excluding "courses dropped" cases) by semester. The cumulative number of courses registered as at the January 2004 semester is 80,481. From this number, 89.7% (72,156) obtained a clear pass while 10.1% (8,153) failed their examinations. Another 0.2% (146) of the candidates under the status of incomplete (Grade I) and a minimal number of students (26) had officially withdrawn from the courses (Grade W).

The passing rates for all subjects exceed 85% in all semesters. However, the trend in the passing rates show that it is fluctuating from semester to semester, with the highest rate of 92.6% in May 2003 and January 2004 Semesters and the lowest rate 85.4% in March 2002 Semester.

Table 2. Total Intakes, Enrolment and Attrition Rates by Semester

SEMESTER	March 2002	August 2002	January 2003	August 2003	January 2004	Total
Intake	2,636	1,075	3,008	727	2,199	9,645
Total intake	2,636	3,711	6,719	7,446	9,645	9,645
Enrolment	2,636	3,536	6,420	7,252	8,910	8,910
Attrition rate	-	4.7%	4.5%	2.6%	7.6%	7.6%

Table 3. Percentage of Students with CGPA <2.0

Cohort	Total number of students	Number of students with CGPA<2.0	% of students with CGPA<2.0
BPG	9,009	491	*5.5*
OM: Bachelor	6,858	1,548	*22.6*
OM: Diploma	1,099	427	*38.9*
Total	16,966	2,466	*14.5*

High-Risk Courses

In US, "high-risk" courses are generally identified as courses that historically have a 30% or greater number of D, F, and W. For the purpose of this study, high-risk courses are those with a history of low grade averages, high failure rates and high withdrawal rates. More specifically, courses with a combined failure, incomplete and withdrawal rates of 20% of greater fall in to this category.

Tables 5 shows the list of high-risk courses for March 2002 to January 2004 Semesters ranked by their failure rates. The table indicates that the list of courses is confined to the following areas: Mathematics, Science and English.

Discussions

On the whole, based on their CGPA's, teachers as a group perform better than the other groups of learners (see Table 2).

Looking at their performance by semester, we found that their average failure rate appears to be low (see Table 4). However, the study revealed that the failure rates among certain categories of courses appear to be high (see Table 5). These courses are termed as "high-risk" courses and they fall under three disciplines of Mathematics, Science and English.

Despite of the low percentage of teachers with CGPA < 2.0, the high failure rates in the high-risk courses indicate that these teachers do not perform well in the core courses. This is of serious concern to OUM because our responsibility to the nation is to ensure that we produce teachers who not only would obtain a degree but would also be very competent in their respective disciplines.

At OUM, we found that the main problems faced by the teachers were associated with **life-related commitments**. Our teachers' primary complaints were that they found it difficult to juggle between study, work and family times. Taking note of this problem, OUM included time management as one of the main topics in its counseling sessions to these teachers.

Table 4. Learners' Performance for All Subjects by Semester

Semester	Fail	%	Incomplete	%	Pass	%	Withdraw	%	Total
March 02	737	14.2	6	0.1	4,430	85.4	15	0.3	5,188
August 02	815	10.3	29	0.4	7,099	89.4	-	-	7,943
January 03	1,793	13.4	26	0.2	11,515	86.4	-	-	13,334
May 03	870	7.2	16	0.1	11,206	92.6	7	0.1	12,099
August 03	2,038	13.1	25	0.2	13,463	86.7	-	-	15,526
January 04	1,900	7.2	44	0.2	24,443	92.6	4	0.0	26,391
Total	8,153	10.1	146	0.2	72,156	89.7	26	0.0	80,481

13

Table 5. List of High-Risk Courses Based on Failure Rates from March 2002 to January 2004 Semesters

Course Code & Name	Failure Rates	Category
MATE3015 Matematik Kejuruteraan	44.8%	Maths
CHEM3024 Kimia II	44.7%	Science
CHEM2014 Kimia I	41.6%	Science
MATH2015 Kalkulus	38.8%	Maths
ENGT2025/ET202 00 Language Learning & Language Use	30.6%	English
PHYS2014 Fizik I	30.6%	Science
MATH1025/MA101 00 Matematik Asas	28.8%	Maths
SPCP1015 Kimia Persediaan	27.5%	Science
STAT2025 Statistik II	27.4%	Maths
MATH2015 Kalkulus	27.2%	Maths
SBPH2103 Motion, Fluid & Waves	26.3%	Science
OUMH1203 English for Written Communication	22.9%	English

In addition, we found that some of the teachers, especially those from the primary schools have low literacy in Mathematics. To make matters worse, Mathematics is usually a prerequisite for all Science and Engineering courses. In overcoming this problem, OUM has introduced a course in "preparatory mathematics" for learners who are weak in this subject.

Another problem faced by our teachers relates to their duration of study. Based on the contractual agreement between MOE and OUM, these teachers are required to complete their programmes within 4 years, which is similar to the time taken by full-time students in a conventional institution. This imposes a considerable amount of strain on these teachers. This is a policy matter which needs to be resolved between OUM and the Ministry of Education.

Some of the teachers do have problems associated with study skills; which includes effective study techniques, reading strategies, improving concentration and memory, time management and managing examination

anxiety. Not many of the teachers maximize the use of the library electronic resources, indexes and abstracts and online searches. To overcome this issue, OUM has made it compulsory for all new learners to take up a new course entitled "Learning Skills for Open Distance Learners". In addition, the Centre for Student Affairs of OUM had conducted several counseling and hands-on training to enhance these teachers' study skills.

Knowing what one knows and what one do not know focus one's learning. In OUM we have made available appropriate platforms for learners to obtain feedbacks on their courses, for example, Tutor Marked Assignment (TMA) forms, dialogue sessions with the learners, and surveys forms. What is left as an issue here is that learners themselves who find it difficult to stick to datelines.

OUM provides an excellent e-learning platform, myLMS for learners use. Many features have been built in myLMS for effective and useful learning, and again the issue here is the lack of use by the teachers (Latifah and Ramli, 2003). In most cases, teachers have to change their attitude, be more creative and innovative in order to succeed in OUM. In fact OUM has gone an extra mile by making available the learners' online bulletin called Learner Connexxion to encourage greater interaction between learners, peers, tutors and staff of the university.

Print modules and other courseware, for example CD-ROMs, are provided to the teachers for self-managed learning. Though the language used poses a big problem to the teachers, they should take steps to improve their level of English. One important requirement for learners to get the most out of the tutorial classes is that they must read and understand the contents before coming in the classes.

For the high-risk courses, the teachers are expected to do more exercises, either on their own or together, collaboratively with their peers in order to gain better understanding of the course content. Again the issue of availability of time arises and on that basis that the teachers expect the academic staff to help by providing more exercises in the modules. This OUM has done, and it has even added more e-learning material to enrich the teachers' learning experience. OUM has also incorporated subject-specific help sessions in its counseling programmes.

Conclusion

The performance of teachers in the Graduate Teachers Programme conducted at OUM is found to be commendable. The overall passing rates of these teachers are very high and those with CGPA's below 2.0 are very small in

number. However, there are a considerable number of "high-risk" courses which need to be attended to for further improvements.

The success of this programme has been attributed to the following: (1) the programme has been customized by both parties, OUM and the Ministry of Education; (2) the flexible distance study modes adopted by OUM allows the teachers to adjust their study schedules to meet their individual needs; (3) an attractive financial scheme that was made available to the students by the Ministry of Education has helped them relief of their financial worries; (4) a promotion scheme for successful graduates serves as a powerful incentive for these teachers, and (5) OUM has been successful in taking the necessary steps to help these teachers improve their grades.

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