A Case Study: Constraints Faced by Open and Distance Learners

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Abstract

Malaysia aims to achieve zero illiteracy rates by the year 2020 and hence the concept of open and distance learning (ODL) as well as lifelong learning (LLL) were introduced in the Malaysian education system. Open University Malaysia (OUM) is the first ODL institution in Malaysia. Other than that, OUM was given the head start with the implementation of the flexible entry (FE) in Malaysia after the Ministry of Higher Education has create the way for greater access into the Malaysian higher education and lifelong learning opportunities in year 2006. The concept of ODL was well-received by the public. As at Jan 2012, OUM has approximately 107,000 cumulative learners in the system. Nevertheless, most ODL learners faced much difficulties and constraints in their quest to pursue their tertiary education eg. time management, motivation, basic knowledge etc. This paper discusses the challenges and difficulties faced by the ODL learners in Negeri Sembilan Learning Centre, Open University Malaysia. The data for the paper is collected using paper-and-pencil survey and the results are generated using descriptive analysis. The discussions of this paper will be able to give an insight to the administrator in determining the ways to assist these learners and hence would be able to provide a better teaching-learning for ODL learners. It is found that the three main problems faced by ODL learners is the preparation of assignment and test, English language proficiency and time management.

Keywords: open and distance learning (ODL), training, constraints

Introduction

With the rapid and non-stop development, the wave of open and distance learning (ODL) swept through the world over the years. In this technology-based century, technology plays a vital role in changing what and how a person learns. The growth of ICT has stimulated ODL institutions to integrate such technology as the main enabler in the instructional and learning process. Malaysia too is affected by the technology wave in the education industry. Education is currently in the period of constant change and continuous learning becomes an inevitable need in the society. The role of information technology is undeniable in education and this cultivates the concept of e-learning in the higher education institutions in the world today. Then term e-education is used interchangeably with open distance learning in this paper. E-learning has received numerous attentions from higher education because the need to change the mode of learning and e-learning has become an increasingly important part of higher education today. E-learning has been around for decades and is one of the most significant recent developments in the information systems industry (Wang, 2003). Teaching and learning via internet, or e-learning is more viable in recent years due to the rapid growth of web-based technologies and the high usage of the internet.

Malaysia too recognized the Malaysia's strides in nation building. It was during the Eighth Malaysia Plan 2001-2005, that human capital was recognized as the most crucial element in nation building and all the way to the Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015). On top of that, the Ninth Malaysia Plan[1] has been propelled according to the five thrusts of the National Mission. Where higher education is concerned, the impetus is given in the second thrust where the emphasis is on improving access to quality education, nurturing research and development as well as increasing the application of technology and ICT to education (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010).

Open and distance learning (ODL)

Open University Malaysia (OUM)[2] adopted modern technology and blended pedagogy in its teaching and learning. However, it is recognized that higher education has to be continuously improved upon due to persistent influence from global trends and its inter-links to society as a whole. Within this context, it is noteworthy to relate the role of Open University Malaysia and how it has steered tertiary education in Malaysia.

Open University Malaysia (OUM) was established based entirely on the concept of providing higher education using the latest internet technology thereby allowing access to education for all. Indeed, OUM is the first ODL (open distance learning) institution in Malaysia set up in 2000 to fulfill the nation's aspiration to increase education opportunities for the people especially the working adults. Through the years, ICT and ODL have become synonymous with the way OUM operates its programs; indeed internet technology has increasingly become an inseparable component of learning and delivering of educational materials for OUM's students (Abu Zarin, et el, 2008). Based on a policy of blended pedagogy, this

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[1] According to Ninth Malaysia Plan, the five thrusts are: *To move the economy up the value chain; To raise the capacity for knowledge and innovation and nurture " first class mentality"; To address persistent socio-persistent socio-economic inequalities constructively and productively; To improve the standard and sustainability of quality of life; To strengthen the institutional and implementation capacity.*

[2] OUM was established on 10th August, 2000 under the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996.

allows for limited sessions of face-to-face tutorials with printed learning materials as inputs alongside online coaching and forum discussions. In other words, OUM's pedagogy is premised mainly on self-managed learning (80%), face-to-face interaction (8%) and online learning (12%) (Abas, et al, 2008). Although e-learning allows for freedom in self-learning, it requires much discipline and perseverance from its learners. On top of that, OUM learners consist 90% of working adults with heavy commitment and despite their rich working experience as well as strong determination to excel in their studies, their academic experience eg. search for academic sources and material, completing an academic assignment etc is relatively weak and vague.

Problems faced by ODL learners

In this study, a total of 121 and 93 ODL learners in Negeri Sembilan Learning Centre (NSLC) were collected for the January 2011 and May 2011 semester respectively. The main problem faced by the ODL learners based on the January 2011 and May 2011 semester is the preparation of assignment and test. Out of the total learners in January 2011 and May 2011 semester, this problem constitutes approximately 44.62% and 44.09% respectively. This may be due to the fact that many of these ODL learners have left studies many years ago and have no slight knowledge in doing an assignment and preparing for a test. For example, ODL learners did not know how to do referencing, in-text citation as well as presentation of assignment. ODL learners also did not know how to face and what to expect from the test. Meanwhile, the second problem faced by ODL learners in this study is English language proficiency followed by computer & internet skills. It covers approximately 21.49% and 26.88% respectively for January 2011 and May 2011 semester. The third problem is the time management.

In this study, the three main problems faced by ODL learners is preparation of assignment and test, English language proficiency and time management. Time management is another common problem faced by ODL learners in this study because ODL learners in OUM are working adults and they are burdened by their daily work commitments, family commitments and due to their dream to pursue tertiary study, they added another study commitment to their plate.

Nevertheless, in the January 2011 semester, there are two other main problems identified by the learners in the Negeri Sembilan Learning Centre, namely; mathematics skills, computer & internet skills and financial problem. Nevertheless, financial problem is the least identified between these two semesters. Refer to Table 1 and Figure 1 for the statistics of other problems faced by ODL learners.

Table 1: problems faced by ODL learners for January 2011 semester and May 2011 semester

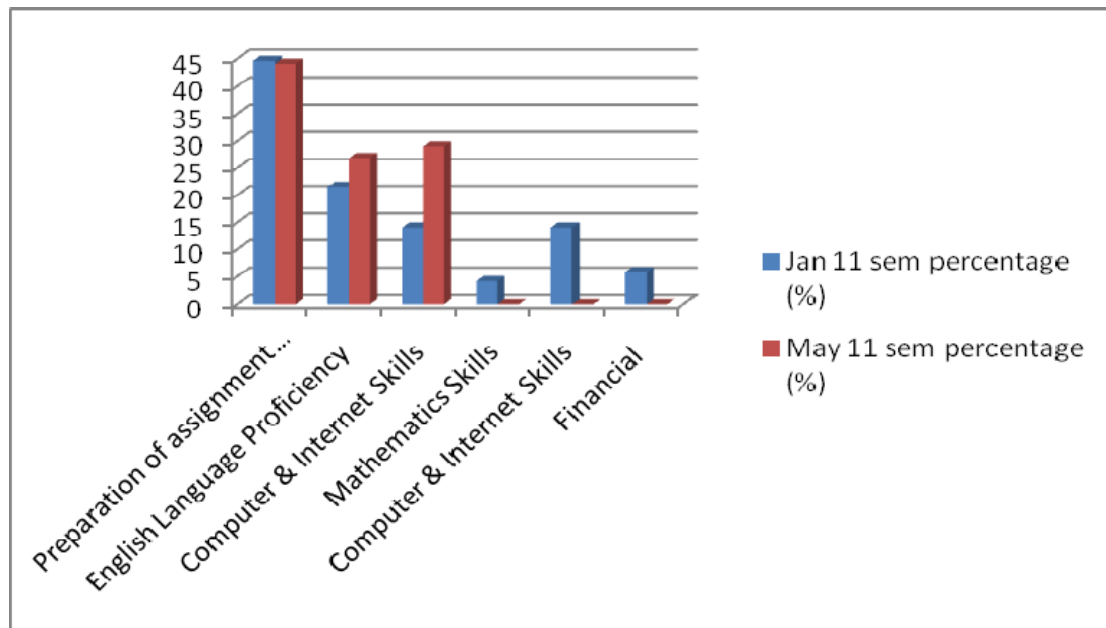| Problems faced by ODL learners	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
	January 2011 semester		May 2011 semester	
Preparation of assignment and test	54	44.62	41	44.09
Learning skills	-	-	-	-
Basic knowledge of the subject	-	-	-	-
Mathematics Skills	5	4.13	-	-
Malay Language Proficiency	-	-	-	-
English Language Proficiency	26	21.49	25	26.88
Computer & Internet Skills	17	14.05	-	-
Time Management	12	9.92	27	29.03
Financial	7	5.79	-	-
Stress	-	-	-	-
Total	**121**	**100**	**93**	**100**

Figure 1: Statistical data for the problems faced by ODL learners for January 2011 semester and May 2011 semester.

Conclusion

Online learning is making its waves in all higher education providers throughout the world. However, the readiness and acceptance level of doing all courses via online still raised many doubts among educationists. In Malaysia, there are several full online distance learning (ODL) education providers, namely Open University Malaysia, Asia e-University, Wawasan Open University etc whose target market are working adults. This study would be able to provide an insight on the relevant and suitable trainings/ workshops provided for working adults learners.

ODL learners are learners with many problems of their own in a way or another. From the results obtained and discussed above, the three main problems faced by ODL learners are preparation of assignment and test, English language proficiency and time management. This shows that the University or learning centre can further organise relevant trainings/workshops to assist the learners. Trainings/workshops should be able to boost the motivation and confidence level for these ODL learners. Due to these problems identified, Negeri Sembilan learning centre has started to organise workshops such as Library and Resource workshop, Information Communication Technology (ICT) training, Bengkel Kemahiran Belajar (BKB) training, Skor "A" assignment workshop for its learners in order to assist and gauge teaching and learning for these learners. The result will ensure OUM remains uniquely a provider of higher education via ODL with the ability to narrow the digital divide in education.

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