

SATISFACTION SURVEY: TOWARDS A “LEARNER-CENTERED” SUPPORT SERVICES

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Abstract

In its basic form, learner-centred support services encompass all aspects of learning and service delivery supports to meet the needs of the learners. In an open and distance learning environment, learners are of diverse background with unique needs that demand the development of special services to support their learning. Open University Malaysia (OUM) is Malaysia’s first open and distance learning (ODL) institution, catering mainly to the working adults who aspire to upgrade their skills and knowledge for better career promotions or better job prospects. In its relentless effort to increase its learners’ satisfaction and retention rates, a satisfaction survey is conducted to assist in better designing, developing and deploying the array of services required by learners. The survey incorporated six dimensions that make up the elements of learner support services in OUM. They are: Assessment; Students’ Record; Learner Centeredness; Teaching and Learning; Registration & Orientation and Student Affairs. T-statistics are used to determine the significant differences in the level of satisfaction of two different cohorts of learners. The findings of the survey are very useful in assisting the management of OUM in formulating suitable strategies to fulfill the needs of its learners, particularly in (i) identifying areas for improving performance; (ii) revising policies and (iii) modifying/creating procedures that would improve services to these learners.

Introduction

Learner-centredness is well-documented in the context of open and distance learning (Burge, 1989), (Gibbs, 1992), (Schmidt, 1996), (Bonk and Reynolds, 1997), (Piccinin, 1997), (Tam, 2000) and (Pulist, 2001). Gibbs (1992) defines learner-centredness as a learning process that gives learners greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study. This implies that learners are the main focus of teaching and learning and they should determine what, where, when and how to learn. The literature in this area is replete with discussions on the approach, pedagogy, learning materials and institutional support that is required to ensure that learners are given full responsibility for their learning. The learner-centred movement has prompted educational institutions to implement strategies which give priority to learners’ needs. These strategies range from designing learner-friendly course materials to providing learner-centred support services. In its basic form, learner-centred support services encompass all aspects of learning and service delivery supports to meet the needs of the learners. In an open and distance learning environment, learners are of diverse background with unique needs that demand the development of special services to support their learning.

Objective and significance of paper

The objective of the paper is to report the results of a satisfaction survey that was conducted by Open University Malaysia (OUM) on its learners on six dimensions of support services. One of the primary concerns of higher educational institutions, more so for ODL institutions is the low learner retention rates. OUM is Malaysia’s first ODL institution, catering mainly to the working adults who aspire to upgrade their skills and knowledge for better career promotions or better job prospects. At OUM, the average retention rate for all cohorts is 80% per year. As in other ODL institutions, OUM is very concerned about its retention rate. This is clearly evidenced in one of the strategic thrusts which reads “Consolidating Internal Group Processes, including

Retention Strategies.” In line with this thrust, several initiatives were undertaken.

One of the initiatives is conducting an annual priority-satisfaction survey to assist the university in better designing, developing and deploying the array of services required by learners (Latifah and Ramli, 2004 & 2005). The findings of the survey are shared with learners, tutors, staff, administrators and management, mainly to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of OUM’s support services. The results prove very useful in assisting the management in formulating suitable strategies to fulfill the needs of its different group of learners, particularly in (i) identifying areas for improving performance; (ii) revising policies and (iii) modifying or creating procedures that would further improve the support services.

Literature review on retention

Not much has been written on the theories and models of student retention in ODL. However, there are a number theories and models that have been written on the topic in the conventional system of learning which may be transferable to ODL.

Tinto (1975) argued that student dropout is a longitudinal process of interaction between the individual and institutional systems during which the individual’s experiences—measured by their integration with those systems—modify his or her goals and commitments in ways that lead to either persistence or dropout.

Yorke (1999) found that Tinto’s theory appeared to provide a better description of part-time than full-time learners and thus is more applicable to ODL environment. Kember (1995) examined further the concept of integration focusing on adult distance learners. He suggested that successful learners were those who were able to integrate both socially (i.e. with family, employment, etc.) and academically (encompassing all contacts with the educational institution). McGivney (1996) carried out a survey of literature and findings in UK’s further and higher education. She found that the areas of pre-course contact and transition to study were critically important in retention and this lends support to the usefulness of the concept of integration in assessing student retention strategies in ODL institutions.

Woodley, De Lange & Tanewsky (2001) criticised Kember’s model and argued the model’s recommendations did not arise directly from the model itself. Bajtelsmit (1998) questioned whether Tinto’s theoretical model was appropriate for non-traditional learners. Alternatively, he proposed a model that puts more emphasis on the influence of external environment, particularly the student’s family and job, whilst de-emphasizing the social integration in the institution. He found that the individual’s background, distance learning skills and academic support system are most important variables.

Visser (1998) looked at the concept of motivation with particular reference to distance education to see what theories of motivation might be applicable to learners to encourage their course completion. Using the ARCS motivation model, he devised a “Motivational Message Support System (MMSS)” and based on a pilot study in a UK distance education college, he found that it was effective in increasing retention.

In summary, external environment and motivation of learners are important in affecting the retention rate of an ODL institution and so are learners’ social and academic integration with the institution. Consequently, the institution’s intervention in influencing the nature of this integration will contribute towards the effectiveness of its retention strategies.

OUM's background

OUM was established in August 2000 with its motto, "University for All". This marked a new beginning of democratisation of education in Malaysia. Its establishment is a unique experiment; the culmination of a consortium formed by the first eleven Malaysian public universities. With the initial synergy and academic networking, OUM leverages on the academic and physical resources of these public universities to develop and deliver its programmes.

At the operational level, it is a private university approved under the Higher Education Institutions Act of 1996. With a humble beginning of 753 learners enrolled in August 2001 under four programmes, the university now has an enrolment of more than 31,700 learners in 26 programmes.

The achievement of OUM thus far is attributable to a number of factors, notably, the dedication and commitment of the academic and support staff, flexible mode of delivery, affordable fee structure, high quality learning materials, and well-chosen and adequately trained tutors. More importantly, all these initiatives are guided by its basic philosophy of learner-centredness.

The philosophy behind learner-centredness is not new to OUM. Since its inception, it has formulated its mission to suit the needs of learners. The second mission statement, for instance, which is, "To develop quality education through multimode learning technologies" clearly indicates that OUM will utilize whatever technology that are appropriate to ensure learners get what they want, when they want and in the form they want. The third mission statement, "To develop and enhance learning experiences towards the development of knowledge-based society" further strengthens its commitment to ensure a rich and rewarding learning experience for its learners.

On the operation side, OUM's blended mode of delivery comprises of self-managed learning, face-to-face tutorial and online learning is one of the initiatives to provide flexibility to its learners. This mode is a boon to its learners and allows them to adapt and adjust quickly into an academic environment appropriate to their learning styles and abilities.

To provide further support to its learners, OUM put in place Learner Services Centre, Digital Library, Learning Management System, Integrated Student Management System, Distributed Learning Centres, ICT Services, and Student Affairs Management. Its research and development efforts have been fundamentally directed towards improving institutional performance. To this end, research activities have been focused on areas such as collaborative online learning, module development processes, e-learning readiness, development of e-content, tutor performance, effectiveness of academic counseling, service quality and learners' priority and satisfaction.

The study

The objective of the study is to determine the differences between the satisfaction of learners enrolled in the open market bachelor programmes (OMB) and special teachers' bachelor programmes (STB) exclusively sponsored by Malaysia's Ministry of Education (MOE) on the support services provided by OUM. The study uses the traditional survey method. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: (i) the background of learner-respondents, (ii) the level of satisfaction on individual items, and (iii) the overall satisfaction on OUM support services. Questionnaires were distributed to the learners during the last tutorial session of August 2004 Semester. Out of a total of 5,000 survey forms that were distributed, 3,210 or 64.2% of them were finally used in the study.

Part I of the questionnaires collected the demographic data of the learners. This information includes gender; age; ethnic group; marital status; programme of study; CGPA; source of funding; distance between home and learning centre; job sector and monthly income. Part II collected information on the satisfaction scores of the learners on each of the 68 items. The items were grouped into six dimensions as follows: learners' record; registration and orientation; learner centeredness; student affairs; assessment and teaching and learning.

Reliability of each of the dimensions was measured using Cronbach's alpha scores and found to be 0.976. Pearson Correlation Test showed that items in each dimension has high convergent validity (significant at $p < 0.001$). The satisfaction of learners is measured using a satisfaction score based on a 7-point Likert Scale with 1 indicating most unsatisfactory and 7 most satisfactory. The data were analysed using SPSS 12.0 for Windows. Cross tabulation tables were generated to provide background information on the different cohorts with respect to the above demographic data. Independent samples t-tests at 5% significance level were run on OMB and STB learners to determine whether there are any significant differences between their satisfaction scores on each of the 68 items and 6 dimensions.

Results of study

The sample size and distribution by cohort are given in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Distribution of Sample and Population by Cohort

Cohort	Sample		Population		% of Sample over population
	Number	% of Total	Number	% of Total	
OMB	1,705	53.1%	9,456	51.7%	18.0%
STB	1,505	46.9%	8,829	48.3%	17.0%
Total	3,210	100.0%	18,285	100.0%	17.6%

Respondents' profiles

Out of the total 3,210 respondents, 44.8% are males and 55.2% are females. Among the STB learners there are more female learners (66.9%) compared to the OMB learners (44.9%). In terms of age, 85.6% are from the 26 to 45 age group. Almost all of STB learners (96.7%) are in this age group while for OMB learners, it is only 75.7%. A significant number (19.2%) of OMB learners are in the 19-25 age group indicating that they are relatively younger than STB

learners. The Malays and other indigenous ethnic groups make up 78.1% of the respondents while Chinese comprise of 12.8% and Indians 7.7%. There is not much difference in the distribution of ethnic group between the two cohorts. The majority of the respondents (77.1%) are married. More STB learners are married (90.2%) compared to the OMB learners (65.5%). The overall academic performance of respondents is commendable with 94.7% obtaining CGPAs of between 2.0 to 4.0. STB learners performed better than OMB learners with only 2.3% of the cohort obtaining a CGPA of less than 2.0 compared to 8.4% for OMB learners. All STB learners are on MOE convertible loan scheme while for OMB learners, 46.5% are on PTPTN loans and 37.3% are on their own. Most respondents live up to 30 km away from their learning centres. Majority of learners (72.5%) are from the public sector, while 21.9% are from the private sector. Two-third of the learners (67.5%) are in the RM2,000 and below income category with the remainder mainly from the RM2,001-3,000 (20.2%) category.

Mean satisfaction scores

The means of satisfaction scores of the *items* for OMB and STB cohorts are 5.06 and 5.18 respectively. The means of the satisfaction scores of the *six dimensions* are given in Table 2. The average satisfaction score for STB is higher at 5.22 compared to that of OMB (5.09).

Table 2: Mean Satisfaction Scores of OMB and STB Learners

Dimension	OMB		STB	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learner's Records	5.24	1.01	5.40	0.97
Registration and Orientation	4.87	1.03	4.96	0.96
Learner-Centredness	4.94	1.11	5.11	0.97
Student Affairs	4.92	1.03	5.04	1.00
Assessment	5.47	0.99	5.59	0.97
Teaching and Learning	5.10	1.02	5.19	0.99
Average			5.22	

Independent samples t-test

The results of the independent samples t-test by dimension are given in Table 3. The difference in the mean satisfaction scores between the two cohorts is significant at 5% level in all the 6 dimensions. The negative mean difference values for all dimensions imply that STB learners are more satisfied than OMB learners on all the six dimensions.

Table 3: Results of T-Test by Dimension

Dimension	t	d.f.	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Learner's Records	-4.145	2,754	0.000	-0.16	0.03794
Registration and Orientation	-2.322	2,548	0.020	-0.09	0.03991
Learner-Centredness	-3.989	2,662	0.000	-0.16	0.04026
Student Affairs	-3.061	2,500	0.002	-0.12	0.04074
Assessment	-3.230	2,712	0.001	-0.12	0.03788
Teaching and Learning	-2.225	2,527	0.026	-0.09	0.04018

Discussion of results

Overall, the results indicate that OUM learners from both OMB and STB programmes are satisfied with the support services provided by OUM. This is shown by the average of the means of their satisfaction scores for all dimensions (5.09 for OMB learners and 5.22 for STB learners) and for all items (5.06 for OMB learners and 5.18 for STB learners).

The t-test by dimension for the Open Market Bachelor (OMB) and Special Teacher Bachelor (STB) programmes shows that OMB learners are less satisfied with the support services provided by OUM compared to STB learners. This observation is further supported by the higher mean value for the STB (5.42) compared to that of OMB (5.02) obtained from one of the questions posted in the questionnaire, "Overall, the support services that OUM provides is satisfactory".

The above results appear to support the probable direct relationship between the levels of satisfaction of learners and retention rates as found in some earlier findings. For 2004, the retention rate of OMB learners was 77.5% while for STB learners was 96.0%. While this study does not establish a causal relationship between the levels of satisfaction and retention rates of the two cohorts, the relatively lower satisfaction level of OMB learners is found to be consistent with its lower retention rate and the converse holds true for STB learners. Thus, this supports the contention that higher satisfaction levels among learners tend to lead to higher retention rates. This is also in line with finding of Tinto (1975) that retention is closely associated with learner satisfaction with their learning experiences.

There are several differences between the two cohorts of learners, but basically STB learners are more homogeneous while the OMB learners are of diverse background. They are also different in other aspects: (i) all STB learners are on a loan scheme, in which case they need not pay any fees up-front, while for OMB learners, 46.5% are on PTPTN loans and 37.3% are self-funded. The latter cohort would be expected to be more critical of the quality of services since they are paying for it. (ii) OMB learners are generally younger; hence probably less motivated as compared to the older STB learners who are presumably more matured, determined, more focused in terms of their life and career plans and spending more time on areas that would contribute to their success in their study.

It is to be noted that "learner-centeredness" and "student record" are the two dimensions in which their mean differences are largest. The intricacies in managing the OMB learners is by far, much greater and items that add to the intricacies include: credit transfer, PTPTN loans, course "add-drop", study postponement, non-active status and others. As for the STB learners, most of these items are pre-determined, for example, in terms of credit transfer, all STB learners are given a standard number of credits transfer, thus minimizing the problem related to "add-drop" of courses. OMB learners are more diverse in terms of their entry qualifications and work experiences, thus rendering the credit transfer process more involved, and these complicate the "add-drop" process. The higher percentage of OMB learners who are on loans have to face the challenge of maintaining a minimum academic standing, that is a minimum GPA of 2.0 in every semester, to ensure the timely payment of fees by PTPTN. When a student's GPA falls short of 2.0 in any semester, PTPTN will suspend payment and learners will have to pay for the fees on their own. This in itself poses a big challenge to OMB learners, because more than 13% earn an income of less than RM1,000 per month. Whilst OUM offers a flexibility of staggered payment of fees, it proves to be problematic for some; they have to resort to other means such as bank loans, etc. Besides financial, other personal problems such as language and learning

disability; lack of computer skills (Latifah and Ramli, 2003); low level of motivation and commitment to study (Mohammad Noor Hj Salleh *et al*, 2005) ; are most likely to exacerbate the situation. Barriers such as lack of interpersonal skills; time management; career related problems and studying in isolation, which were identified among the STB learners (Latifah *et al*, 2004) were found to be common among all cohorts. These barriers appear to influence the decision of some learners, whether to postpone or continue their studies.

OUM is a learner-centered institution which strives to remove administrative barriers and reduce bureaucracy in order to provide convenient, seamless, and “one-stop” service. Learners must be given fair, prompt, responsible, user-friendly and caring services making them feel that OUM truly values the privilege of serving their needs. These needs include a vibrant and healthy environment that nurtures their personal growth, appropriate activities that can increase learning in various dimensions and personal experience that enhances sense of belonging to the institution.

Items such as *“I am proud of being an OUM student; phone enquiries are handled well; OUM staff is caring and helpful and my problems are resolved immediately”* reflect the degree or “learner-centeredness” that is practiced in the day-to-day management of learners. These results reveal that OUM will have to remove barriers and departmental bureaucracy to maximize learner convenience and adopt the philosophy of “when you receive a problem, you own it until it is resolved”. OUM will also need to provide additional study support, improve the call center and internalise the caring culture among staff, tutors, and administrators of the learning centers. The smallest mean difference in the level of satisfaction between the two cohorts was the “teaching and learning” dimension. The biggest gap is in the item “personalized learning”. This alternative mode of study applies only to OMB learners whose tutorial group size is smaller than 10 at any particular center. In most cases, learners prefer OUM’s normal blended mode of learning. Those who are on personalized mode have less face-to-face meeting but more online interaction. This personalized mode of learning does not necessarily suit all learners because some are dependent on the face-to-face interactions. Obviously this brings about dissatisfaction among the learners of OMB programs who were “forced” to go *personalised*. As for the STB learners, a modified mode of the blended learning is conducted to cater for tutorial groups of less than 10. This explains STB learners’ favorable satisfaction ratings on “modules are helpful” and “face-to-face tutorial sessions are effective”. An increase in the use of online learning and more effective online facilitation may help OMB learners who are on the personalized mode to cope better academically.

Conclusion

On the whole the study appears to indicate that OUM learners are satisfied with the quality of the support services provided by OUM. The t-test further indicates that STB learners are significantly more satisfied than OMB learners. The reasons for the latter findings are many, as described in the above discussion. Based on the findings of this study, OUM will have to conduct further research into those areas of relatively lower satisfaction scores. Improvement in these areas will make learners more satisfied with their learning experience and will continue their study pursuits to achieve their goals. This will not only contribute towards better retention rates but through the good word-of-mouth by these highly satisfied learners will also help increase enrolment.

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