
STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH OUSL SUPPORT SERVICES

G.D. Lekamge
Gaya Ranawake
K.A.R.D. Gunaratne
R. Jayananda

Abstract

This paper outlines a research study undertaken as part of a project funded by the Department for International Development (DfID) project on distance education at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). The objectives of this study were to establish student understanding of the University, their satisfaction with support provided at registration, their satisfaction with academic support and other support provided throughout their study with the OUSL. To achieve the above objectives, a pilot study was conducted by administering three questionnaire modules focused on OUSL support system to three sets of students. Frequencies and Chi-square analyses were used to interpret data. The results of this pilot study clearly suggest that proper guidance is essential for a distance learner, especially at the initial stages. It is also important to note that the other facilities (libraries, dormitory facilities, canteens etc.) necessary for students throughout their studies should be expanded.

1. Background to the study

The level of student support is regarded as one of the important means of analysing the effectiveness of teaching-learning experience in a distance education system. According to Hodgson (1986), it contributes to the process of learning as much as the study material. Further, support systems developed in recognition of student needs, help the distance learner become competent and self confident in learning, social interactions and self evaluation (Rae 1989). Therefore, many distance education institutions are concerned about the strengths and weaknesses of their student support systems. For instance, Brindley and Louis (1990) reported a change of direction from a strong philosophy of independent study to one of interactional model of support services in the Athabasca University. As they explained, this change had been reinforced by a number of factors: the major ones being a clear institutional goal of improving completion rates, the availability of much better information about their student population, and the challenge of being more effective with fewer resources.

It would be wrong to assume that adult learners have the ability and the relevant information to make decisions about courses to be selected and skills and knowledge required in achieving their educational goals. In fact, in any distance education institution, student support should start especially with pre-admission and pre-registration services. As these student support services play an important role in the distance learner, there should obviously be a mechanism to evaluate the quality of these services regularly.

The study carried out by the student research centre of the Open University of UK (OUUK) on Monitoring of Student Satisfaction (MOSS 1994) provides a framework for the study of support services in distance learning institutions. The objectives of the MOSS study were several fold: to investigate the establishment of a system for routinely providing data on support to students during the inquiry, application and entry stages; effective operation of continuous assessment system; support to students using new technologies. Findings of this study indicated that at the initial stage of distance learning, students should be provided proper guidance and counselling to be able to develop self-study patterns. If not, they concluded, the student will either drop out from the course or fail to meet the requirements of the system.

Bowser and Race (1991) have conducted another study to evaluate an orientation programme at UCCQ. The aims of this study were to establish whether the needs of the participants were being met, to identify who is using the orientation and why, to identify where improvements or changes were warranted, and to determine the real cost of the orientation function. Here also the findings indicated that the provision of a structured, decentralised orientation programme with balanced academic and administrative services did have an important place in the delivery of distance education.

At present the Open University of Sri Lanka is also planning to improve its student support services. The number of studies carried out at the OUSL, though limited, have widened up the scope of this planning. For instance, Ismail (1997) conducted a research aiming at the identification of factors influencing the student dropout from the educational programmes offered by the OUSL. It revealed a strong relationship between students' decision to dropout and their satisfaction with the support provided by the institution. Several other studies (Wijeratne 1991, Lekamge 1993, de Zoysa 1995, Jayathilake 1997) had also looked into different aspects of distance education. However, a comprehensive study which will give regular data about all aspects of services provided to the students of the Open University had not been undertaken till now. Therefore, under the DfID project, student support was identified as one of the main areas to be investigated. As an initial step, a pilot study was conducted to get an understanding about students' satisfaction with the support provided at the registration and also with the other support available through out their study with the OUSL. The following sections reveal the methodology and findings of that pilot study.

2. Development of questionnaire modules on student support services

It was decided that the most appropriate means of obtaining feedback on students' satisfaction with regard to support services would be through a questionnaire. At the beginning a lengthy questionnaire was prepared to cover all aspects of student support and distributed to some academics including Heads of Departments and Deans. Incorporating the suggestions made by them, the questionnaire was broken down to three modules to cover support at registration, academic and other support. The main areas covered in each module are given in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Main Areas covered in the Questionnaire Modules

Support received at registration (Module I)	Academic support (Module II)	Other support (Module III)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal details• Reasons for study• Impressions prior to registration• Information and guidance received• Sources of information• Quality of sources of information• Difficulties faced at registration• Other problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal details• Interaction with OUSL• Day school facilities• Laboratory facilities• Continuous assessment• Final examination• Financial assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal details• Library• Dormitory• Canteen• Other services (incl. Telephone, postal, student counsellors etc)

To obtain a feed back from the students on the questionnaire modules, a pre-pilot study was carried out with about 50 students. In addition to the questions relating to the above in Table 1, each module in the pre-pilot study had a section at the end regarding the questionnaire itself. This section questioned the students on language preference, length of questionnaire, questions and instructions that were not clear, etc.

Incorporating the views expressed by the consultants, research seminar participants and especially the student respondents, the instruments were further improved and then translated in to Sinhalese language. A pilot study, which is the main focus of this research paper, was then conducted by administering the revised and improved modules to three sets of students to investigate their satisfaction with OUSL support.

3. Pilot study

3.1 Samples and response rates

The Questionnaire Module I was sent to all 360 students who had registered for the Law degree programme (LLB) in 1997. These students were selected merely because they were the most recent set of students who had registered at the University at the time of finalising the instrument.

Table 2: Sample for Pilot of Questionnaire Module I

Centre	English	Sinhala	Total
Colombo	157	153	310
Kandy	10	32	42
Matara	01	07	08
Total	168	192	360

Of the total population of 360 surveyed, 130 (36.1%) returned the **Questionnaire Module I**. A total of 108 out of the 310 students (47%) from the Colombo regional centre, 15 out of 42 (35.5%) from the Kandy regional centre, and 7 out of 8 (87.5%) from the Matara regional centre returned the questionnaire. With respect to the medium, 79 of the 168 students (47%) who received the questionnaire in the English medium and 51 out of the 192 students (28%) who received the questionnaire in the Sinhala medium responded.

Questionnaire Module II was distributed to B.Sc. students who had enrolled in the program in 1995/96 academic year. This sample frame was chosen because it was felt that the students should have some years of experience to express their opinion about academic support available to them. However, even after reminders, only 10% (31) responded to it. Therefore, a decision was taken not to include data from this questionnaire module in this article. It is difficult to say at this point whether it is the different nature of the sample or difficult nature of the issues being addressed in the questionnaire that played a part in the low response rate. However, it is obvious that further investigation should be undertaken as to how response rates could be increased by encouraging the students to reply.

Table 3: Sample for Pilot of Questionnaire Module II

Centre	English	Sinhala	Total
Colombo	100	160	260
Kandy	15	25	40
Matara	03	07	10
Total	118	192	310

The focus of the **Questionnaire Module III** was on the other facilities such as libraries, dormitories and canteens etc. available to students. Therefore a random sample of 150 each across faculties was selected. Only 106 (23.6%) respondents out of a total of 450 returned the questionnaire.

Table 4: Sample for Pilot of Questionnaire Module III

Centre	English	Sinhala	Total
Colombo	125	175	300
Kandy	30	70	100
Matara	10	40	50
Total	165	285	450

3.2 Characteristics of the Respondents

Of the 130 that returned the **Questionnaire Module I**, 83.1% are students from the Colombo regional centre, 11.5% from the Kandy regional centre, and 5.4% from the Matara regional centre. This total consisted of 60.7% English medium and 39.2% Sinhala medium students. When considering the ages of those who responded, less than 4% were between 18-20, a majority of about 60% were between 21-29, another 14.5% were between 30-39 and nearly 22% of the respondents were above the age of forty. Among these returnees, there were 35.9% females and 64.1% males with only about 38% of them married. The majority possessed A/L (59%) and another 25% possessed Diploma or above as their highest educational qualification. A fair proportion (35.9%) of the respondents indicated they were unemployed with the remaining 64% engaged in a variety of jobs.

Out of 450, only 106 students returned the **Questionnaire Module III**. The students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences had a response rate of 28.0% with the Faculty of Natural Science following with 26.7% and the Faculty of Engineering Technology returning the least with only 15.3%. The respondents consisted of 45.7% registered at the Colombo regional centre, 23.8% at the Kandy centre and 13.3% at the Matara centre and all the other centres combined accounted for the remaining 17.0%. The majority of the respondents were between 20-29 years (56.6%), mostly male (69.8%) and largely unmarried (66.7%). Most of them have only come up to their A/Ls or less (69.9%) but it was found that more than two third of the sample were employed (68.9%).

3.3 findings of the study

In this section, we outline the main findings of the pilot study including frequencies and Chi-square results. Chi-square tests were used to investigate any significant relationship with age, gender, educational qualification,

occupation, marital status and centre with the other variables covered by the questionnaire.

Satisfaction with support during registration (Module I)

The majority of students indicated extending knowledge (82.9%) or improving career prospects (67.5%) as their most important reasons for deciding to follow the LLB degree programme. It was encouraging that many students had decided to study with the OUSL as their first preference because of the essential features of the distance teaching methods adopted at the OUSL. For instance many indicated the ability to study even while employed (69.2%), study at their own time and pace (39.2%), study irrespective of age (36.9%), study without requiring to attend regular lectures (25.4%) as their reasons for choosing the OUSL for their higher studies. These are some of the features that make OUSL distinct from other conventional universities. As such these should be further strengthened and should be major considerations when scheduling academic activities.

However, some of the respondents had chosen OUSL because of their "inability to enter a conventional university" (43.1%) and because "the course is not available anywhere else" (29.2%). This finding supports the view that the OUSL provides a second chance to those who are unable to get into universities in formal education system. When asked to indicate the main reason for choosing the OUSL, (Fig. 1), "study while being employed" was the choice of most respondents (38.7%), followed by "inability to enter a conventional university" (19.4%).

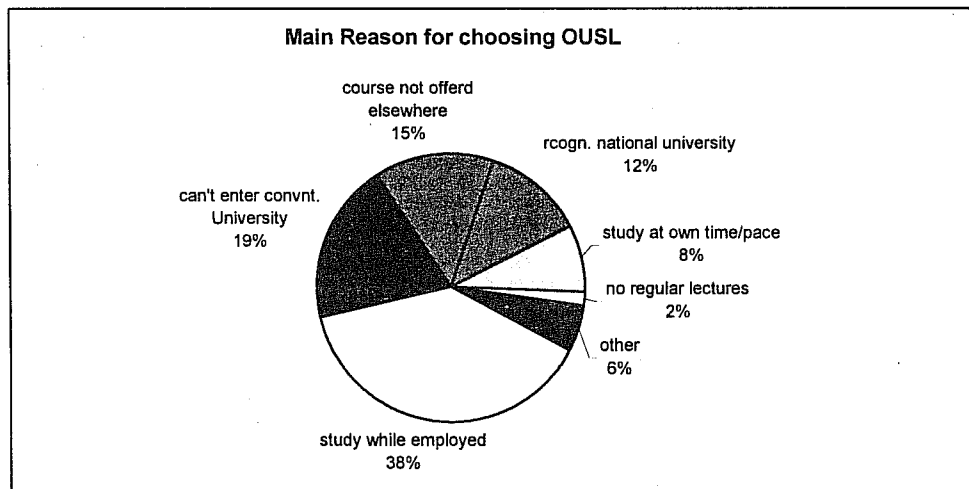


Fig. 1

Interestingly chi square tests revealed a significant correlation between main reasons for deciding to study further and marital status ($\chi = .477$ significant at .0001) and educational qualifications ($\chi = .588$ significant at .005). Single respondents had indicated career prospects (59.5%) and extending knowledge (29.7%) as the main reasons. Married people had another important reason to add on to their list that was their personal development (26%). The majority of the respondents, who had only G.C.E. A/Levels, wanted to study further to improve their career prospects and this relationship was significant. However, no significant correlation was found between reasons for choosing OUSL courses and gender or age. It appears that irrespective of gender and age people decide to study further aiming at getting better jobs, promotions and to improve their knowledge.

From the responses, it is also apparent that a majority of the students had a good idea of the different aspects of distance teaching methods adopted at OUSL. Their expectations with regard to components of the study program included: printed material (79.2%), discussion/ tutorial consultations (65.4%) written assignments (65.4%) and self-study and independent learning (61.5%). However, it appears that a fair proportion of students had expectations regarding formal lectures too. Perhaps more attention should be paid on enlightening the applicants on this aspect.

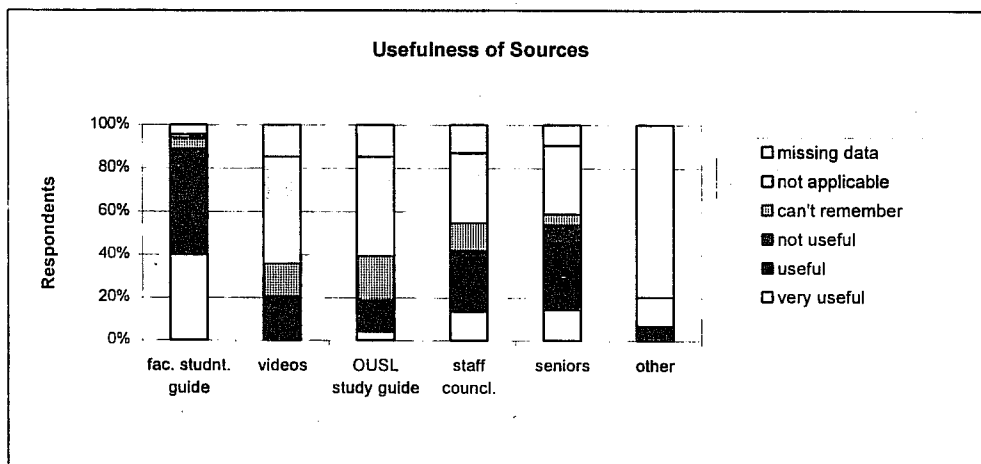


Fig. 2

Respondents appear to have found the Faculty Student Guide extremely useful (83%). It is also interesting to see that some students have found talking to seniors more useful (45.4%) than academic counselling by the staff (33.8%) as shown in Fig. 2. Though the students have found the faculty

guide a useful source for obtaining information, their levels of satisfaction with its content (53.9%), visual presentation (26.2%) and clarity (33.9%) were not very high. Hence, when revising the faculty guide, this aspect should be considered. Here we found students, though a very small number, answering positive when the question is not applicable.

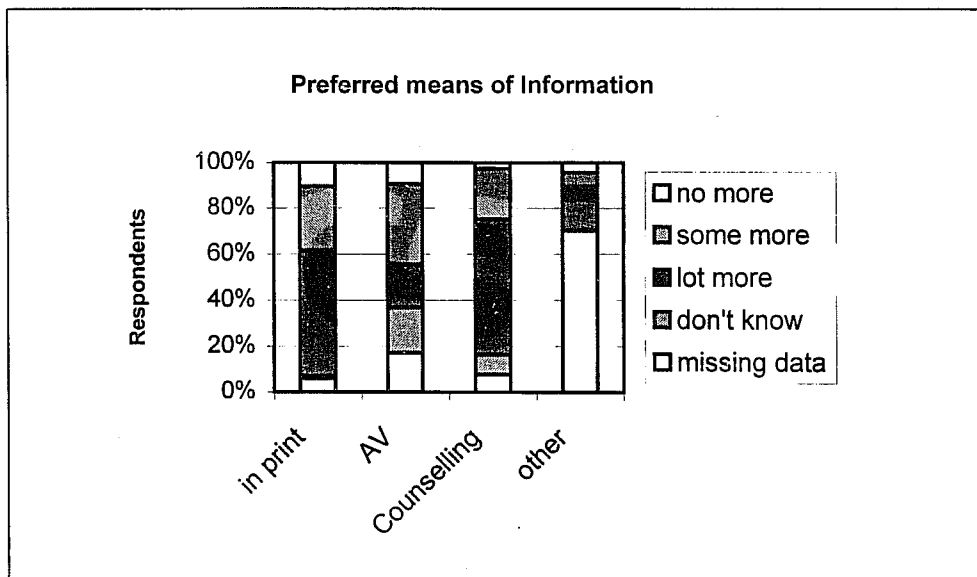


Fig. 3

On the other hand, it was disappointing that many students either could not remember or thought the relevant sources of information provided to them to obtain information as not applicable. Whether this fact has a reflection on the impact these sources had made on the student needs to be thought about.

The results also indicate, as in Fig. 3, the students would certainly like more information/advice/guidance on a variety of aspects preferably in the printed form (83.1%), videos (55.4%), or from a counsellor (79.2%) who can help them with queries on a one to one basis. As a distance education institution the OUSL must consider the possibilities of providing clear and precise information in the printed form. In addition, the use of orientation videos as much as possible would be useful.

Finally, the major problems faced by most students at registration appear to be the non-availability or not receiving of books and assignments (56.9%). This situation is very discouraging because the print modules (books) are expected to take the place of the teacher in a distance education system.

Therefore it is not surprising to find that students consider the above situation seriously. Long delays at registration (50.8%) and inability to locate registration counters (35.4%) were the other main problems they had. Therefore, better sign posting to locate the counters and minimising the time a student spends at registration may be helpful for newly enrolling students. Clearly, these problems reveal the areas we should improve to smoothen the registration process for students.

Satisfaction with other support services (Module III)

The first set of questions in this module probed student opinion on library facilities. Among the reasons for using the library the important ones were "to refer material directly connected to the programme" (73.3%), "to refer final examination and continuous assessment papers" (62.8%) and "to gain extra knowledge in the field" (62.8%). There does not seem to be one main reason as to why the students use the library (Fig. 4), though more than half gave it as "to refer material directly connected to my programme" (56.0%).

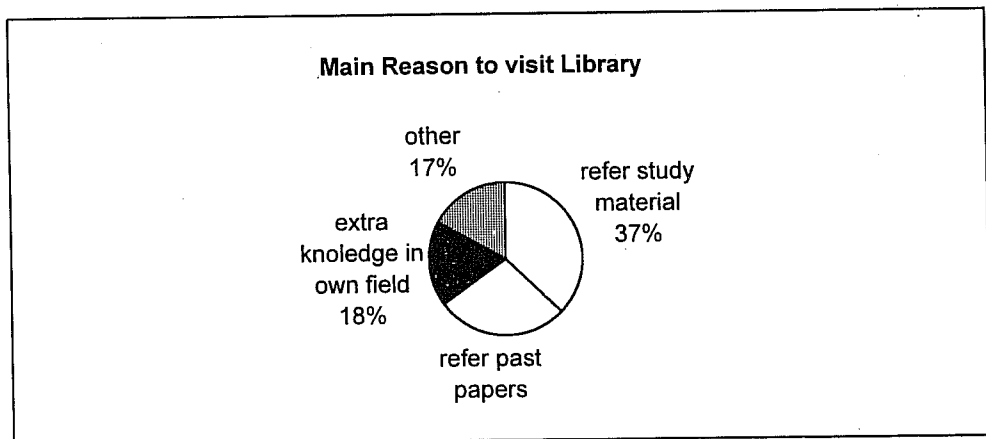


Fig. 4

Though not primarily intended for general students' use, the main library was the one visited by most students (67.1%) as well as the most important one for many students (46.8%).

Half the students (50.0%) stated the necessary material not being available at their centre as the main reason for preferring this library over the one at their own centre. The chi-square analysis indicated no difference between the gender, age, marital status, or centres in these respects. A majority of students (60.5%) said that their library visits were irregular and driven by specific needs.

The Kandy library seems to have most problems with the availability and quality of printed material; though scoring high on other facilities such as the opening hours, seating and ventilation, photocopying services etc. The Colombo library came out on top in these categories whereas the Matara library was the least popular. Regarding the multimedia facilities, though the degree of satisfaction was generally low (less than 20%) the Kandy library was placed highest among them.

Only 36 respondents had made use of the dormitory facilities, which were still on offer at that time. Out of those 36, 23 were male. More than half of the respondents (57.7%) has mainly used the Colombo dormitory. That may be because students have to come to Colombo centre to attend their practical classes which last two to seven days according to the nature of the programme. Though their satisfaction was moderate with regard to general facilities at the Colombo dormitory, it was somewhat low regarding "first-aid-facilities" (21.9%), "refreshment facilities" (25.0%), "comfort" (34.4%) "toilet/washroom facilities" (40.6%) "cleanliness" (46.9%) and "obtainability" at only 25%. It was also found that student satisfaction with regard to the facilities available at the Kandy dormitory was very low. Those who had never used dormitory indicated "lack of need" as the main reason (69.9%). As majority of the respondents to this question were from Colombo regional centre, this finding however cannot be relied upon to reflect the situation of the OUSL student body in general, especially those from out stations.

Only 13 respondents have never visited a canteen of the OUSL. The canteen of the Colombo regional centre has been visited slightly more than the canteen of the main campus (62.4% vs. 57.0%). Here the low satisfaction of the respondents was mainly about the variety of food (37.6%) and about the cleanliness (only 40.9%). "Value for money" gained 66.3%, while "quantity of food" stood at 52.2%. The satisfaction with the services stood at 66.3%. In general, the satisfaction levels for establishments outside Colombo were markedly lower.

Queries on services such as telephone boxes, postal services, book/stationary shop, recreational facilities, social activities, study areas, health centre, information centre, access through telephone showed low satisfaction on all the areas. A pronounced difference was observed on the relatively high level of satisfaction with services offered at Colombo regional centre, though the values are around 30%. At other centres the values do not even approach 20%. The Chi-square tests to determine the difference between the centres, in terms of the facilities provided, revealed no significant results.

4. Overall conclusions

At this stage the questionnaire modules appear relatively satisfactory needing only minor adjustments. Though insight gained from these pilot studies are important, we feel separate studies should be carried out with larger sample frames.

A whole range of issues relevant to new registrants had been surveyed, though an important area we have not addressed is of identifying the factors that play a role in an applicants decision not to register with the OUSL or to drop out after registering for the programme. For the present however, the Questionnaire Module I will still be a useful tool in contributing for the future improvement of the registration process.

One concern highlighted during the pilot survey process was the low response rates obtained for all three modules. Sending reminders to return the completed questionnaires and translating the instruments into Sinhala do not appear to have increased the response rates markedly. Therefore it is necessary to investigate why the response rates are low and also look into strategies that could encourage students to return the questionnaires (e.g. giving some incentives).

However, we are encouraged to have a response rate of almost 40% for Questionnaire Module I together with the responses that have come after the first reminder. This is quite high compared with the response rates of other studies conducted by the Distance Education Research Culture Team (DERC). This, as well as the responses given to open-ended questions, indicates the need and the willingness of students to convey their opinion and grievances. It is vital that action is taken on the findings so that the concerns of the students are addressed, and remedied.

This survey, even at this pilot stage, clearly suggests proper guidance is essential for a distance learner, especially at the initial stages. Findings of the MOSS study of the OUUK (1994) also indicated that at the initial stage of a distance study, students should be provided proper guidance and counselling.

In relation to other support (Questionnaire Module III), it was apparent that the students use library to refer material directly connected to their programmes. This is a good sign that the students have shown an interest in reading additional material. Perhaps, a reading list given along with their course material at the point of registration may encourage them more.

However, the study did not reveal how far the students use additional reading material other than their modules. Overall, students are not happy with the other facilities provided at the main centre. Therefore, steps should be taken to improve them to required standards. Further, facilities at other regional centres should also be improved so that the students who visit these other centres will be benefited.

The present study has no doubt highlighted to some extent the areas of concern of the newly enrolled students, as well as those who have been studying with the OUSL. It also reflects how students perceive the services provided to them. Feed back information collected thus will certainly provide the decision-makers and administrators with the necessary database to develop a far more efficient and effective system of student support at the OUSL.

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