

STUDY OF LEARNER EXPECTATIONS: CASE OF REGISTERED STUDENTS FOR THE BACHELOR OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES (BMS) DEGREE PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka University entrance is based on a competitive examination, which is the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination. But it is more worth to understand that student enrollment every year by the University Grants Commission (UGC) is relatively low. According to statistics in 2009 about 126,000 students out of a total of 199,000, who sat the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination, qualified for University Entrance. From that figure too, only 21,547 were enrolled by UGC. This is only 17% of the students who got qualified for university admission. Therefore there are many A/L passed out students as well as working adults who seek higher education opportunities. This has created a huge market for those institutes which cater to the people who seek higher education. In this context, The Open University of Sri Lanka is unique since it can be considered pioneering body of open and distance learning in Sri Lanka. Established on 22nd June 1980 under UGC, the OUSL has completed 30 years of unbroken national service in the spheres of higher learning, research and scholarship to become an emerging Open Distance Learning (ODL) centre renowned for excellence both nationally and internationally. The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was set up for the purpose of providing higher educational facilities to persons above 18 years of age with relevant basic qualifications, in Sri Lanka. Providing high quality service to the customer has become more significant to the organisation's success and even to the existence of the organization itself.

Further, the concepts of customer service and customer satisfaction have to be redefined due to the changing lifestyles in society and the 'fast life' of today. These obviously have implications on expectations of the learner (the customer or the target beneficiary). The purpose of this research was to examine the expectations of the learners of the Bachelor of Management Studies degree programme offered by the Department of Management Studies of the Open University of Sri Lanka at the time of enrollment.

According to Davis (1999) students learn best when incentives for learning in a classroom satisfy their own motives for enrolling in the course. This is an indication that the course design is not an exercise of only the teacher. Learner's expectations from the course should also be considered. Peterson (1996) focuses on learning as a process based on incorporating new information into existing knowledge and explains that the process of teaching may differ according to the learner expectations. According to him an assimilative process is suitable where the learner expects to widen the knowledge he already has. In contrast in the accommodative process it is important to develop new information using new knowledge, instead of existing knowledge (revising knowledge). In order to choose which method is to be adopted it is essential to know the expectations of the learner. Evans et.al. explains that learning is a process performed in a different way by each individual and for any educational course to be effective, it must be adaptive to the needs of each student, as each student will have different goals, and will take different paths when attempting to reach those goals. All these explanations further justify the objective of this study.

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METHODOLOGY

This research aimed to determine learners' expectations of the Bachelor of

Management Studies (BMS) degree programme, at the time of enrollment. When an individual chooses a course or a programme of study he/she expects something out of it and that was what the researchers were interested in knowing in order to serve them better. The researchers felt that the best location to meet the learner in order to obtain their views about such expectations was the registration desk. The Bachelor's Degree of Management Studies is of four year's duration. When a student registers for the degree for the first time he registers at level 03.

To collect the data for the study a questionnaire was prepared to obtain information on the reasons for selecting university education, learner expectations and the background information of respondents. The questionnaires were distributed in many centers. This was done in February 2011 at the registration for Level 03 of the BMS degree programme. Therefore the respondents were those who had got newly registered for the programme. The researchers selected only newly registered candidates as the respondents, since a person who gets newly registered for a programme is more clear about his/her expectations. The responses were received from the Colombo(319), Kandy (84), Matara (29), Vavuniya (35) and Batticaloa (33) centers. However, only 284 responses out of the total 500, received were selected for the analysis due to incomplete responses. Data was analyzed using frequency tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The highest percentage of respondents who got registered for the BMS degree is employed in the private sector. As explained in Table 1 it amounts to 48% of the total respondents. 25.3% of the respondents is unemployed. Another 17% is employed in the government sector. Only 4.3% is self employed either with or without employees. What is implied from this finding is that those who register for the BMS degree are mostly employed .

The course design and content has to be carried out keeping in mind the needs of such candidates. Demanding professional commitments and family responsibilities of many adults often make attending a conventional, full-time, face-to-face course with fixed timetables a rather unrealistic proposition, and the reasons why adults choose distance education are primarily "the convenience, flexibility and adaptability of this mode of education to suit the needs of individual students"(Holmberg, 1989).

When the respondents were requested to state why they chose the BMS degree their response was that they need to find new or better jobs and have better prospects. Next they were asked what made them choose University education. Since they have registered with the Open University, one has to keep in mind that the respondents must have answered this question keeping the Open University in mind.

Answering the said question 64.5% of the respondents stated that they chose University education for job prospects. The next highest percentage of respondents joined the University because they could not find a placement in another University (It is 19.7 % of total respondents). This further indicates that the intention of the majority is to enhance their job prospects. This is one of the motivations of an adult for learning identified by Lieb (1991). Professional advancement, achieving higher status in a job, securing professional advancement and staying abreast of competitors are those motivations that Lieb has identified. Most of us hold the view that people join the Open University because they do not get a chance to join a traditional university. But the percentage of candidates who fall into that category is insignificant when compared with the percentage who seek job prospects.

Table 1: Nature of Employment

Economic activity/Employment	Number	Percentage %
Private sector	112	39.4
Cooperative sector	1	0.4
Government sector	39	13.7
NGO sector	3	1.1
Other sectors	2	0.7
Own business with no employees	8	2.8
Own business with no employees	5	2.1
Unemployed	58	20.4
Total responses		
No response	55	19.4
Total	284	100.0

Table 2: Reasons for selecting the BMS programme

Reason	Total	
	No.	%
Better prospects	87	30.6
Develop own business	13	4.6
Find a better job	30	10.6
Find a job	80	28.2
Recommendation of another	4	1.4
Relevance to the learner	57	20.0
Others	4	1.4
No response	9	3.2
Total	284	100

The researchers were interested in understanding whether specific features of the Open University have made learners choose the Open University for their higher studies. The specific features that were given for the respondents to rate were availability of regional centers, open and distance learning, non compulsory attendance and ability to take few courses per year.

Therefore the respondents were requested to indicate the features in the Open University education which made them choose the Open University of Sri Lanka for University education. But unfortunately a higher percentage of respondents have not responded this question. However among those who have responded, the highest percentage preferred the Open University for the fact that there is an option of selecting only a few courses a year. What is implied from this finding is that the specific features of the Open University system has not resulted in choosing it for higher education. The lack of age barriers may have resulted in them enrolling at the OUSL since many of them are already employed (this was not given as a factor to rate). Further those who have missed their education at any stage in their lives may have chosen this option. This has to be probed into, in further studies.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions that could be arrived at from the findings of this study are that the majority of the learners who register for the Bachelor of Management Studies degree are employed in the private sector. They are below 35 years of age. As far as the employment of the learners is concerned they are less experienced and work for small organizations. The expectation of the learner is mostly to find a new job or to find better prospects in the existing jobs. They do not show much interest in the features that are specific to open distance learning. The opportunities for earning a degree at any age seems to be the most impressive feature of the Open University system. As the learners have not shown any reason specific to the Open University system for selecting the Open University for their studies, the researchers are forced to assume that the relaxed age barrier has been a stronger reason for their choice. At present the Department of Management Studies mostly targets the audience that has missed on university entrance. But it does not seem to be the segment they should be focusing at. Instead rather the Department should be targeting at the young employees who seek higher qualifications for better prospects. The learners do not seem to be financially weak and it is an indication that the quality improvements could be introduced even at a higher cost.

The understanding of the expectations of learners indicates that the course content of the Bachelor of Management Studies Degree programme has to be designed to suit the young employee in the private sector. The skills and knowledge they need to perform their jobs better to impress their employers should be imparted through the programme. The learner expects to enhance the job prospects through the BMS degree. Therefore the value of the degree programme need to be enhanced to suit the needs of the employers. A demand could be created only if the learners perceive that their intentions of better job prospects could be achieved through this programme. The learners are below 35 years and not stable in their jobs. So the scheduling of activities has to be done in a manner which does not disturb their employment related activities.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research team wishes to thank Professor of Management of the Open University of Sri Lanka, Prof. Sudatta Ranasinghe for the strength and insights provided in carrying out this study. The Head of the Department of Management Studies Mr. Dharmapriya Senanayake too need to be thanked for the assistance and support extended in administering the questionnaire. The Research Director of Neilson Company Lanka (Private) Ltd. Mr. Jinendra Kothalawala needs a special thank for highlighting the need for a research on learner expectations before course design is done.