

## Perceptions of Students (In-service Teachers) on OUM as an Open and Distance Learning Provider

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### Abstract

Distance learning has become a recognized method of educational delivery in institutions of higher learning. There are, however varying degree of acceptance to distance learning by learners. This paper reports on a study to investigate the perceptions held by in-service teachers about distance learning offered by Open University Malaysia (OUM). In particular, the paper reports on the findings of the research conducted to investigate the gap between factors perceived as important by the in-service teachers and those that were provided by OUM. Six factors were identified for the study:

- (i) access to information and administrative support;
- (ii) the teaching and learning process;
- (iii) learning support;
- (iv) programme implementation;
- (v) outreach; and
- (vi) academic support.

A questionnaire survey was conducted using a set of questionnaire comprising two sections. The first section is aimed at depicting demographic information from the respondents. The second section of the questionnaire consists of 37 items encompassing the six factors or dimensions to be investigated. Six hundred sets of questionnaire were then distributed to the in-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching at twenty OUM's learning centres throughout the country. There were a total of 178 male respondents and 402 female respondents, ranging from age 25 to 49. The results of the study indicate that teacher learners are highly satisfied with five out of the six factors investigated. A detailed analysis also reveals the services that are satisfying to teachers as well as services that have not met the expectation of the teacher learners. Information and findings gathered from this research helps OUM to identify its strengths and weaknesses, with the aim of improving its services as a leading provider in open and distance learning.

### Introduction

Like many other countries in the world, Malaysia acknowledges that education plays a crucial role in nation building. Across the globe, enhancing human capital is now seen as a crucial factor in driving knowledge-based economies. In order to enhance human capital, many countries give greater priority and allocate substantive proportions of annual budgets to education and training. Malaysia is no different from the rest of the world; our Third Outline Perspective Plan (OPP3) recognizes that "the successful development of the knowledge-based economy will, therefore, largely depend on the quality of the education and training system (Education Planning Unit (EPU), p. 133).

Distance Learning (DL) has become a recognized method for delivering educational content in institutions of higher education. According to Allen and Seaman (2007), improving students' access to higher education has been cited as a major reason for offering DL courses and programs. Distance Learning involves a student-centred approach in which the instructor takes the role of the facilitator and students engage in peer learning (Maor, 2003; Mitchell *et al*, 2005). The literature on education cites several examples of research that has been conducted on DL (Chambers, 2006; Hagel and Shaw, 2006; Liao, 2006; Muilenburg and Berge, 2005). There is an emphasis in the literature on the importance of research for improving students' DL experiences (Levin and Wadmany, 2006; White, 2005). According to Sahin and Shelley (2008) students' needs and perceptions should be central in the design, development and delivering distance education courses. Overall, the literature suggests that there is a need to understand better the variables that affect student's level of motivation in taking

distance learning courses. This may lead to a greater understanding of the benefits and limitations of learning by distance and could be useful to programs considering the implementation of DL initiatives and/ or students planning to enrol in DL.

Ali (2010) suggests that in the ‘race’ towards creating knowledge-based economies, universities have to continually evolve with the changing needs of the community – through changes made in programmes, infrastructures, delivery methods, technologies and philosophies that meet the community’s demands and needs. He also highlights that Open and Distance learning (ODL) has become the primary means by which an unprecedented number of people have had opportunities to attend higher education, unlike previously where the only tertiary education one could get was by attending conventional universities. This transformation in the way higher education is being made available to the masses has played a significant role in the upgrading and upskilling of professionals across a large sector of domains, including those in the education domain. The upskilling and upgrading of the current teacher workforce in Malaysia is seen as the way to enhance teacher quality and this particularly fulfils the aim of widening access to affordable and quality education, one of six National Key Results Area (NKRA). The enhancement of teacher knowledge and competence is believed to be a strong contributory factor resulting in improved student outcomes.

The purpose of this study was to:

- a) examine the extent to which in-service teachers pursuing the Bachelor of Teaching Programme are satisfied with their experiences as adult learners in open and distance learning;
- b) identify areas of strengths and opportunities for improvement in the Bachelor of Teaching Programme in meeting adult learner needs;
- c) suggest recommendations on how to further improve the upgrading of in-service teachers via the Open and Distance Learning mode.

## Research Methodology

The research population was identified as all 4678 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching intake January 2012. The samples were selected using a stratified random sampling technique according to six geographical zones in Malaysia, namely:

- a) North – (states of Perlis, Kedah, and Penang);
- b) Central – (states Selangor and Perak, and Federal Territory Kuala Lumpur);
- c) South – (states of Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor);
- d) East – (states of Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang);
- e) Sabah and;
- f) Sarawak.

A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed to the various OUM learning centres, according to the six zones. But a total of 580 students participated in the survey.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A consists of demographic items, and Section B comprises 37 items which measure the six factors identified in this study, which include: (i) access to information and administrative support; (ii) teaching and learning process; (iii) learning support; (iv) programme implementation; (v) outreach; and (vi) academic support. These factors were adopted and adapted from the Eight Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners as identified by Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) to suit local conditions related to the six factors.

The following table shows the definition of the six factors.

(i) access to information and administrative support	This factor consists of 11 questions describe about the uses of information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience in OUM.
(ii) teaching and learning process	This factor consists of 7 questions which describes on the uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.
(iii) learning support	This factor consists of 6 questions, describes how the institution assists learners using student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.
(iv) programme implementation	This factor defines and assesses the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigour. There are 5 questions pertaining to this factor.
(v) outreach	The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities. Six questions were developed for this factor.
(vi) academic support	This factor consists of 5 questions describes how the institution assists learners using comprehensive academic systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.

The four-point Likert Scale of Importance and Satisfaction was used: {Very satisfied (4), Satisfied (3), Dissatisfied (2) and Very Dissatisfied (1)}. The survey was administered during face-to-face tutorial at twenty OUM's learning centres throughout the country.

The completed questionnaires were returned to the Faculty of Education and Languages and data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Also, the Importance-Satisfaction Analysis chart was computed to determine the in-service teachers' satisfaction as adult learners in ODL mode and also to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement of the Bachelor of Teaching programmes.

## Findings

Tables 1(a), 1(b) and 1(c) illustrated the demographic background of the respondents. A total of 178 male teachers and 402 female teachers participated in the research. Having more female than male teachers is a common phenomenon in Malaysia. More than 90% of these teachers are below the age of 45; since this is the required age limit for in-service teachers to be sponsored for further study by the Ministry of Education. About 60% of these teachers are well experienced having taught for more than 10 years. About 4% of them have more than 22 years of teaching experience.

Gender	Frequencies	Percentages
Male	178	30.7
Female	402	69.3
Total:	580	100.0

Table 1a: Distribution of Respondents According to Gender

Age Range	Frequencies	Percentages
25 – 29 years old	79	13.6
30 – 34 years old	149	25.7
35 – 39 years old	180	31.0
40 – 44 years old	123	21.2
45 – 49 years old	49	8.4
Total:	580	100

Table 1b: Distribution of Respondents According to Age

Teaching Experience	Frequencies	Percentages
3 – 6 years	35	6.0
7 – 10 years	191	32.9
11 – 14 years	142	24.5
15 – 18years	142	24.5
19 – 22 years	47	8.1
More than 22 years	23	4.0
Total:	580	100

Table 1c: Distribution of Respondents According to Teaching Experience

The Importance-Satisfaction Quadrant Analysis was used to visualize the relationship between importance and satisfaction ratings. In the quadrant analysis, the overall mean for satisfaction was plotted against the overall mean for importance, for each factor.

	Importance			Satisfaction			Gap
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
1 Adminsupport	580	3.4714	.39524	580	3.2415	.40344	.23
2 Teachinglearning	580	3.4350	.40925	580	3.2352	.40850	.20
3 Learning support	580	3.1022	.55960	580	2.8261	.52901	.28
4 Program	580	3.4003	.43458	580	3.1161	.46278	.28
5 Outreach	580	3.4931	.38130	580	3.2821	.38507	.21
6 Academicssupport	580	3.4167	.40649	580	3.1270	.40930	.29

Table 2: Importance-Satisfaction Gap Analysis

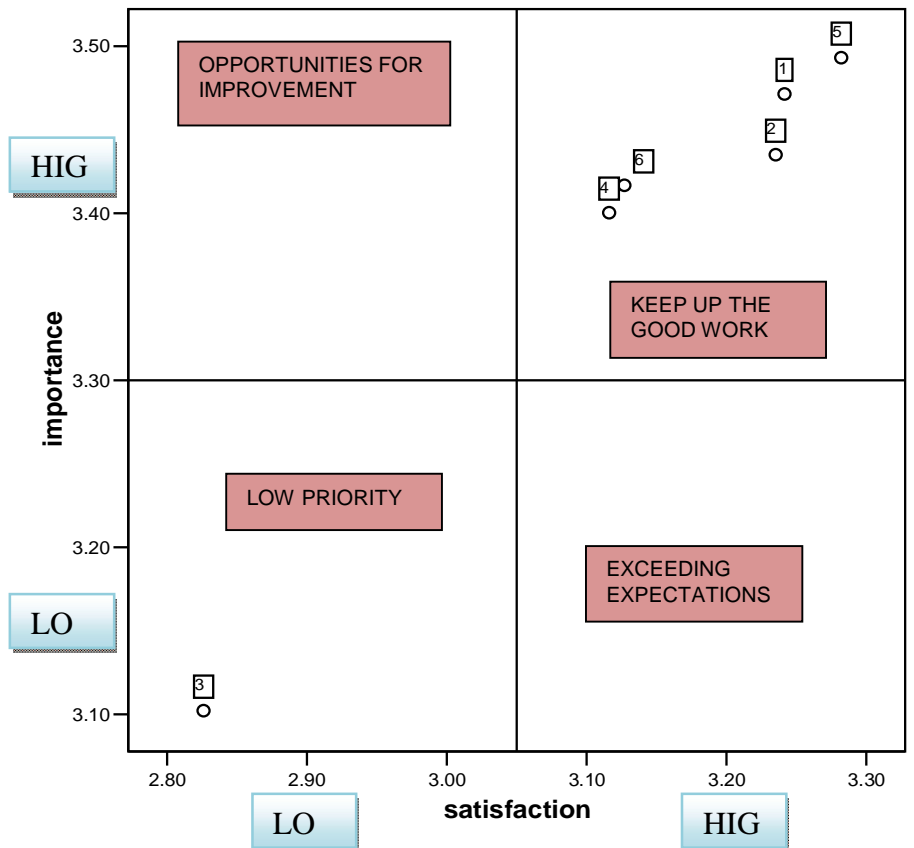


Figure 1: Relationship between Importance and Satisfaction for Each Factor

Table 2 indicated the gap analysis between factors perceived as important by the in-service teachers and satisfactorily fulfilled by OUM as a training provider. The low difference of not more than .30 clearly indicates OUM good performance.

Quadrant analysis as depicted in Figure 1 indicates OUM programmes did well with delivery of the teaching and learning process to the adult learners since five factors are within the High Importance,

High Satisfaction quadrant. These five factors are:

1. Factor 1: Access to Information and Administrative Support
2. Factor 2: Teaching & Learning Process
3. Factor 4: Program Implementation
4. Factor 5: Outreach
5. Factor 6: Academic Support

A detailed analysis revealed several services which are satisfying such as:

- i. easy online registration procedures;
- ii. the use of technology for communication;
- iii. easy access to information online;
- iv. an enriched learning experience which allows learners to perform better;
- v. gaining tutors respect;
- vi. good interactions between learners and tutors.

However, there are areas where OUM can improve her services including:

- i. making available support service at any time and not only at the learning centres;
- ii. providing immediate feedback to request for assistance and information;

- iii. tutors providing feedback on learner assignments;

Although announcements and reminders for submission of assignments and re-registration for the following semester were made online through the OUM portal; some of these teachers still missed the deadlines. They suggested for OUM support staffs to remind them personally on such matters. Action has been taken by sending out sms and emails as reminders besides the usual online channel.

Factor 3: Learning support is the only factor which is in the Low Importance, Low Satisfaction quadrant. The in-service teachers find low need to have extra tutorial classes; but they would like to have workshops on study skills and special examination clinics. Besides that, OUM will need to enhance the current academic counseling provided.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research indicated that OUM has performed well in providing support and services to the in-service teachers currently enrolled as ODL learners. Besides, fulfilling their needs satisfactorily; OUM also ensure the programmes offered are of quality. Furthermore, this research has provided OUM the opportunity to improve its services as a leading provider in open and distance learning.

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