

Learning Skills for Distance Learners: Providing 21st Century Learning Support

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One of the main goals of open and distance education (ODE) programmes is to ensure that knowledge and skills gained positively affect performance or behavior. Apart from that, ODE programmes should also ensure learners extend their existing learning skills into new directions. However, it has always been a challenge for open and distance learners to cope with learning varying degrees of skills as they lack face-to-face interactions when compared to traditional learners. As such, learning skills are essential if students are to develop as independent, lifelong learners in the information age. The teaching and learning environment of open and distance education has been transformed by the independent learning opportunities that technologies have provided. However, the mass of information available as well as the growing educational demands has created new sets of problems for students in managing and using information effectively to build their own knowledge and future careers. Due to this, most distance education institutions have developed their own learning skills programs in order to prepare their students for open and distance education environment. In this paper, we will share findings on Open University Malaysia's *Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners* course (OUMH1103). A questionnaire of 25 Likert-type statements and three open-ended questions was designed and used to gather data from students. Questionnaires were distributed to students randomly through the web. 330 students completed the questionnaires and uploaded them to the web. It can be concluded that students are satisfied with the OUMH1103 course and there are no major differences in course attitudes. However, one compounding finding is related to application of search skills and also discernment of information to accomplish course goals. The paper will provide suggestions on ways and means to circumvent this issue.

Keywords: Distance and open education, learning skills, 21st Century Learning Support, Search Skills

Introduction

The teaching and learning environment of the Open University Malaysia (OUM) has been transformed by independent learning opportunities provided by the OUM Learning Management System (myLMS) and supported by the Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners course (OUMH1103) which provides learners with the required skills and knowledge while operating in a technology-rich environment. A questionnaire of 25 Likert-type statements and three open-ended questions was designed using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to gather data from students mainly from the second and third academic years. Questionnaires were distributed to students randomly through the web and participants were informed by the University Research Department to guarantee their confidence. 305 students completed the questionnaire and uploaded them to the web. The feedback from students is essential and helpful to underline the necessary modifications and improvements to the course.

Studies have documented both favorable and unfavorable students' perceptions in distance education. Previous studies have found significant differences in distance learning attitudes, motivation, or experiences based on features such as age, gender, ethnicity, self-confidence in using online learning technology, type of institution and competence of the online environment. The confidence in utilizing online learning technology is a developed experience from "not using these technologies" to being "comfortable with online learning technologies".

Scenario of Learners in OUM - ODL Environment

Close to 90% of Open University Malaysia are adult working students. Their average age is about 30 years and about 90 % of OUM students had left school for more than 10 years. Some had kept up with the learning environment in the form of attending workshops and training sessions. But most OUM students have lost touch with schooling and there are instances where the gap between leaving school and becoming a student at OUM is about 15 to 20 years. OUM adopts a blended learning approach which combines Self-Managed Learning (approximately 70% of student time) with face-to-face learning interactions (approximately 15% of student time) and online interactions (approximately 15% of student time). OUM students are given the opportunity to attend face-to-face classes at any one of the 53 OUM Learning Centres closest to them. These classes are normally conducted once every fortnight for 5 times a semester during the weekend in a 14 week semester. OUM students are also given further learning support online, using a Learning management System called myLMS. Here, the students get to download all relevant learning resources and participate in online discussions as well as do online quizzes. OUM students are also provided with specially designed learning modules to cater to self-managed learning activities. In a nutshell, the OUM students are taxed minimally by the institution in terms of their available formal learning time, due to their other commitments as a working adult and house-holder. This does not mean the OUM is compromising on student learning time, however OUM believes in the flexibility philosophy: OUM provides the support, students manage their time according to their needs and flexibility. Further deliberations on support has OUM to conclude that the profile of OUM learners indicate they need support in learning skills.

Learning Skills

A simple definition of learning skills is, all the skills that are provided to a learner to equip him/her with the necessary knowledge to function efficiently as an ODL learner. According to Schumaker and Sheldon (1985), these are “ techniques, principles, or rules which enable a student to learn to solve problems and complete tasks independently” (in Gordon, 1994). Why are learning skills important? Research shows that learning skills

affect academic achievement whereby they expect an increase in academic skills and performance. The importance of learning skills is also manifested in the many instruments that have evolved. As quoted by Gordon, eight different instruments were identified that assess general study strategies for use with college students. These are: (a) the Study Habits Inventory (Wrenn, 1933, 1941); (b) the Study Habits Inventory, revised edition (Wrenn, 1941); (c) the Study Habits Inventory (Brooks & Heston, 1945); (d) the Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes (Brown & Holtzman, 1965); (e) the Students Attitudes Inventory (Entwistle et al., 1971); (f) the Study Attitudes and Methods Survey (Michael, Michel & Zimmerman, 1972); (g) the Study Behavior Inventory - Form D (Mueller, 1984); and (h) the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (Weinstein, Palmer & Schulte, 1987).

The Survey of Habits and Attitudes - Form C and the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory, are currently being used at institutions of higher learning in U.S. as a screening and diagnostic tool for students, and as evaluation instruments for classes which teach study strategies.

At the OUM, the OUMH 1103 course *Learning Skills for Open Distance Learners* is being offered to students to equip them with adequate knowledge and skills to function as efficient ODL learners capable of maximizing the different learning modes. Broadly, the course which was written by a panel of 7 experts and implemented in 2004 include the following major sections : Learning to Learn Skills, Basic Computer Sills and Information and Library Skills. The course is further sub-divided into nine topics:

- Managing learning.
- Reading for information.
- Note- making and note- taking skills.
- Presenting information.
- Coping with assessments.
- Information gathering process.
- Skill in information retrieval.
- Evaluating of information.
- Using Microsoft application (Words, Excel, and Power point).

In the year 2006, the module was selected by an International Panel of the Commonwealth of Learning and was awarded the *Best Distance Print Learning Material*. This indicates that the module had all the merits of good content, layout and instructional design.

Open Distance Education

Many countries around the world are continually exploring ways to expand their educational services to reach a greater number of adult learners in need of services. Advancements in telecommunication technologies have created opportunities whereby educators in higher education institutions can expand the educational process beyond the traditional classroom and deliver instruction and training to geographically diverse audiences locally, nationally, and even internationally. Also, distance education affords educators the opportunity to extend their educational offerings. These advancements in telecommunications and rapid growth in distance education programs have led to a formal definition of distance education as being "the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance" (United States Distance Learning Association 1998). The integration of telecommunications technologies into a distance teaching and learning process reflects a shift in the classroom-based paradigm that educators have used for many years.

Distance education provides advantages and benefits especially for students who don't have the chance to meet their instructors in a face-to-face environment. Distance education connects the learner and teacher to resources that are difficult to access otherwise. Furthermore, distance education helps save money in terms of accommodation and travel expenses (Bradshaw and Hinton, 2004). Over the last couple of decades there has been an explosion of interest and activity surrounding distance learning which have evolved together with communication technology.

All technologies such as the telephone, the television, computer technology and internet are reflected in the evaluation of distance learning, from correspondence courses to interactive video and virtual learning environments. Digital and networked technologies, in particular, have had great effects on the educational materials, and practices. It proved saving time and improving cost-efficient, and delivery. Digital and networked has been a particularly important development in making it possible for instructors and students to access a wealth of information and each other quickly, easily, and interactively in both face-to-face and remote education settings .

Literature Review

The goal of open and distance education should be learning or knowledge gain that positively affects student's performance or behavior. Distance learning, as a learning methodology, is increasing in use and investment throughout the education spectrum. Distance learning effectiveness, as measured by learning and student preference, has mixed results (Anderson, 2005; Cappel & Hayen, 2004; Esch, 2003; Gallaher, 2002; Greengard, Connolly, & Saunders, 2001). Distance learning and classroom are often compared to determine which is more effective (Chapman, 2005; Hylton, 2006; McFarland & Hamilton, 2005). These studies have confounded results and report marginal differences between methodologies.

One common attribute of distance learning programs is they are predominantly text based. Success in text-based courses is dependent on several skills; one of which is reading skills. Distance learners need to have different levels of reading skill and preferences with online learning materials. The gap between student studying skills and course requirements will affect student comprehension. So, there has been great responsibility on course designers, subject matter experts and program administrators to ensure that students are prepared with the appropriate studying skills for the distance education programs. Unlike a traditional course, online students cannot passively listen to a lecture while taking notes. Study skills are essential if students are to develop as independent learners in the information age.

The mass of information available and the ease with which this can be accessed and downloaded has created new sets of problems for students in managing and using this

information effectively. Without the foundational skills and abilities associated with the different curriculum, students are unlikely to benefit from the instruction provided in that curriculum.

What does an online course demand that traditional class does not? Online learning requires self-discipline and a greater amount of work than a traditional course. Students must demonstrate a high degree of independence and motivation. Online discussion is a unique way for students to demonstrate knowledge through their interactions. Essential to online interactions are hands-on projects, reports, and goal-directed searching for information rather than reading a huge amount of articles part of it unrelated.

Many researchers had identified that successful distance learners demonstrate good reading and writing skills, which are essential for acquiring most of the course information, and are sufficient to master the competencies.

Educational institutions that provide formal distance learning tends to build preparation resources that help students to "take a course", while Informal learning is learning that occurs independently and often without direction. Regardless to the formality, basic computer and Internet skill, managing learning, note-taking and making, presenting information, coping with assessments, information gathering process including searching, retrieval, and evaluating are a must for all distance education students'. These are foundational skills that must be developed in students before learning can occur. The main resources to prepare for this type of learning are available in form of a core course for prepare students with the needed skills for open & distance education. AT OUM, this course is OUMH 1103: *Learning Skills for Open Distance Learners*

Methodology

The two main research methodologies: qualitative and quantitative were utilized to design a survey to get an idea of the suitability of the contents of OUMH1103 in preparing students with required study skills.

In defining perceptions of students in distance education preparation materials, a questionnaire was used to gather data from the student's population using multiple techniques. The population was chosen from the second and third academic years at the University.

Participants were informed about the research via OUM online announcement board and email before questionnaires were distributed on-line. The questionnaires were attached with a cover letter by the university research department to build a sort of confidence and to create a voluntary relationship between participant and researchers. Questionnaires were distributed randomly to students. Questionnaires include twenty-five Likert-type statements and three open-ended questions.

The on-line survey services found at the following website (www.Freesurvey.com) were used to distribute the questionnaires. Different students' perceptions are represented by four independent variables: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) study program and (d) Learning Centres. Questionnaires were vetted and validated by 2 OUM academic staff and changes were made to the questionnaires before uploaded on line for data collection. The instructions that accompanied the survey were edited to clarify and explain the purpose of the survey. The survey contained 25 items and respondents were asked to rate each one of the items on a 1–5 Likert scale (from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”).

Moreover, three open-ended questions were included in order to gather students' opinions and suggestions of how to improve the course. The survey was designed so that, as each respondent completed it electronically, the response was captured into an output file and imported into SPSS™ (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) with an Excel document for more detailed input.

Limitations and restrictions

The survey questionnaires were uploaded and distributed among the students just one week before the final examination because there was a time constrain for one of the researchers to stay in Malaysia. As a result of students' commitment to final

examinations, the response rates from populations to the surveys were lower than expected. Researchers sent 3 reminders within a month. The conclusions based on the results derived from the small sample size cannot be generalized to a wider population. However, the results are very helpful in the development process of the learning skills course.

Results

Section A

A total of 330 students completed the questionnaire; consisting a total of 185 females (56%) and 145 (44%) males. A total of 153 (46%) of the respondents were from the 30-39 years age group, 86 (26%) from the 40-49 years age-group, 85 (26%) from the 20-29 years age group and 5 (2%) from the above 50 years age group. 58% (192) students were from Year 2, 26% (85) from Year 3, 14% (46) from Year 4 and 2% (7) students from Year 5. 38% (125) students were from the Faculty of Business and Management, 25% (84) from Faculty of IT and Multimedia Communications, 21% (69) from Faculty of Education, Arts and Social Sciences, 9% (29) from Faculty of Science, 2% (6) from Faculty of Engineering and Technical Studies and the remainder 5% (17) cannot be identified. 29% (96) respondents were from the Central Region, 23% (77) from the Northern Region, 15% (48) from the Southern Region, 12% (39) from Sarawak, 11% (35) from Sabah, 9% (30) from Eastern Region and 2% (5) cannot be identified.

The percentage of respondents according to gender, faculty, regions, years of study and age represents rather quite closely to that of OUM on the whole.

Section B

Figures 1-5 show that most of the students tried to avoid the “strongly disagree” and “disagree” options except for statements 15, 18 and 20. As questions 15 and 20 were worded in the negative, there is no cause for concern. However, question 18 is an issue to

delve into further. Responses to the question: *I have difficulty to search for information effectively* signifies a situation which is open to the following interpretations:

1. Students still lack skills to effectively search for information.
2. Students do not have proper access to library facilities- whether online or offline

The maximum numbers of students who selected “uncertain” are on statements 16, 19 and 21 respectively. These statements are about how to apply the skills they had learnt to use the OUM digital library, how to memorise content effectively and how to use scholar (academic) information for assignments. This shows that there is concern with regards application of skills to effectively search online resources using the digital library and subsequently to use such resources to complete their assignments.

The most common answers are “agree”, which is obvious, and “strongly agree” to some extent. For example: In the learning to learn skills, it was found that more than 80% of the students indicate that as a result of going through the course, they have been able to set their learning goals, use motivational strategies to self-motivate, write better assignments, cite references and they do not plagiarize. Between 70-79% of students say that they are able to self-manage their time, manage stressful situations, better concentrate on their studies, use correct reading techniques, make good study notes and acknowledge sources of work in written assignment. Between 60-69% say that they know how to use memorization skills and they know their learning style. It is interesting to note that about 24% of students marked ‘unsure’ when asked if they knew how to use memorization skills.

All three questions on Basic ICT Skills for learning namely, able to use MS Word, Excel and Power-point more effectively had a response of more than 80%. And for the skill set searching for information, more than 83% of students were able to apply myLMS skills, get an overview of content in the myLMS, learnt how to use the Internet and used the skills given to actively participate in online discussions. 57% reported difficulty in searching for information and only 63% said they used the skills learnt to search for information in Digital Library.

Section C

In the open ended questions category, referring to Table 1 a total of 330 comments were received on the 3 open-ended questions and about 88% of responses were related to “no answer/no comment/no idea/, good/all covered/agree and not relevant. Data showed that the following areas of concern need more attention:

- a. Quality, quizzes and references – 2.42%
- b. Application of skills and Digital Library – 2.42%
- c. Tutors/Delivery methods - 2.73%

Table 1: Qualitative Data According to Categories

Categories	No	%
No answer / no comment / no idea	261	79.09
Good / All are covered / Agree	15	4.55
Graphics / colour	5	1.52
Quality / quizzes / references	8	2.42
Language	3	0.91
Practical / skills related / Digital Library	8	2.42
Tutor / Delivery Methods	9	2.73
Not relevant	21	6.36
Total	330	100.00%

Discussion

The following emerged as major findings of the survey :

1. Students have concerns on how to effectively conduct searches mainly using online technologies and this could include searches done using the OUM Digital Library and using other available databases such as Google, Yahoo and such.
2. Students also face problems on how to discern between selecting the right articles to use in the completion of their assignments.
3. Students show concerns with memorization of information
4. Students have concerns with some pedagogical methods used by tutors

The following are suggestions to improve the OUMH 1103 course content and implementation to better support learners in the 21st Century:

1. Provide some applied lessons on the use of the digital library and the major databases.
2. Provide a hot line services to assist the OUMH 1103 course students' facing difficulties.
3. Ensure all tutors involved in teaching this very important course, a trained separately on the application of skills, the enhancement of knowledge and attitudes towards life-long learning.
4. Further study of the intrinsic problems in distance education courses will help overcome problems encountered by lack of specific learning skills.
5. Further research into course development techniques will help to understand which methods work best in the distance-learning classroom as well as what its required learning skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the survey on OUMH 1103 course has pointed to the fact that students are concerned about their lack of ability to use proper search skills to get to the right information and also discern between vast knowledge available, despite having completed the course OUMH 1103. It is imperative that, this limited results are reflected upon, pertinent points discussed and further action taken to ensure, the students receive the full benefit of the course. This will ensure, most students at OUM will have the correct mind-set, skills and knowledge to carry them through all the years as independent autonomous learners.

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Appendices

Table 1 List of Likert statements

#	Question	Average
1	I have learnt how to set goals to achieve my targets. (For example: I want to start my MBA by 2008.	4.078689
2	I am able to apply the skills I have learnt about how to motivate myself in achieving my study aims.	4.104918
3	I have learnt how to manage my time smartly and I am able to do so.	3.940984
4	I have applied the strategies I learnt in managing stressful situations.	3.829508
5	I am using the skills on how to better concentrate in my studies	3.82623
6	I am able to effectively apply the skills I learnt about MyLMS	4.016393
7	I know how to get an overview of content.	4.036066
8	This course has given me the skills to use the Internet	4.07541
9	This course has given me the skills to actively participate in the online discussion forums in MyLMS.	4.111475
10	I have acquired the correct reading techniques which have helped me to remember the content better.	3.786885
11	I am able to use the skills I learnt to make good study notes	3.816393
12	I am confident in preparing assignments for my courses.	3.898361
13	I can properly acknowledge information from other sources that are incorporated into my assignments.	3.944262
14	I know how to cite references in the assignment.	4.009836

15	I do not know my learning style yet.	2.265574
16	I know how to memorise content effectively.	3.586885
17	I do not plagiarise in my assignments.	4.2
18	I have difficulty to search for information effectively.	2.580328
19	I have applied the skills I had learnt to use the OUM digital library	3.357377
20	I cannot decide on which information is suitable for my assignment.	2.334426
21	I use scholar (academic) information for my assignments.	3.727869
22	Now, I am more able to effectively use MS Word.	4.190164
23	Now, I am more able to effectively use MS Excel for creating charts.	3.84918
24	Now, I am more able to effectively prepare MS PowerPoint slides.	4.042623
25	Overall, I find the Learning Skills for Open And Distance Learners course helpful in my learning in OUM.	4.209836

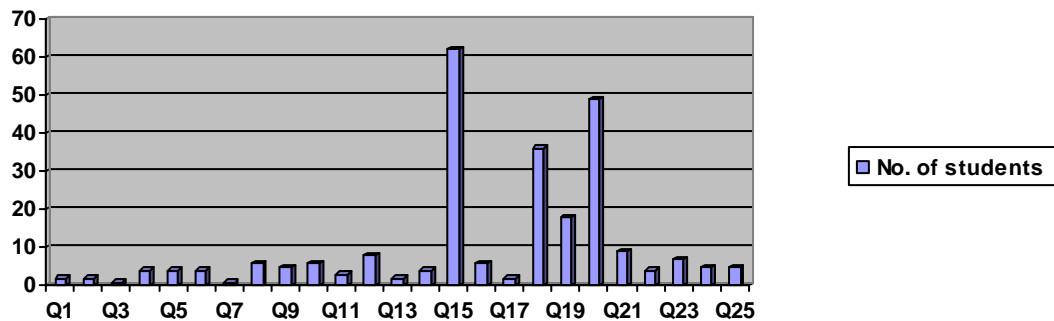


Fig. 1 Responses of "strongly disagree"

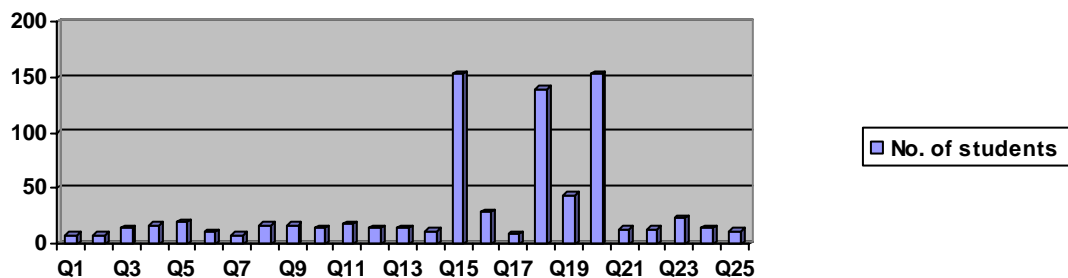


Fig. 2 Responses of "disagree"

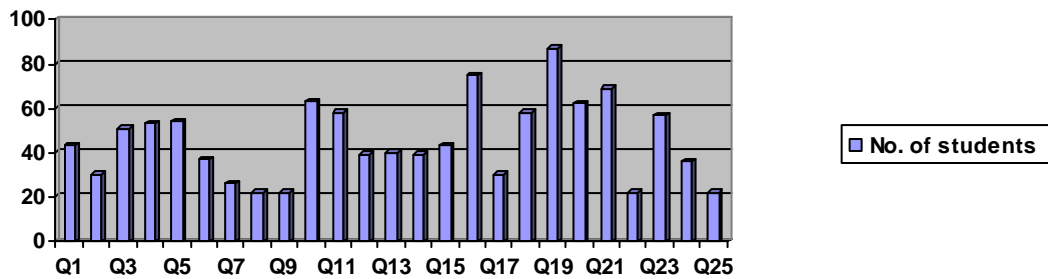


Fig. 3 Responses of "uncertain"

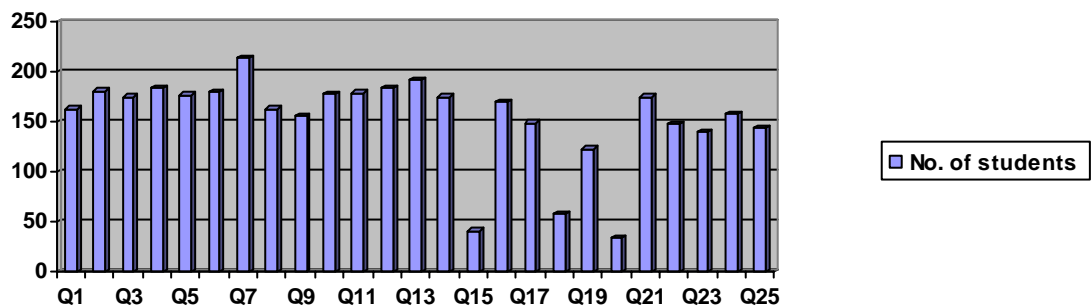


Fig. 4 Responses of "agree"

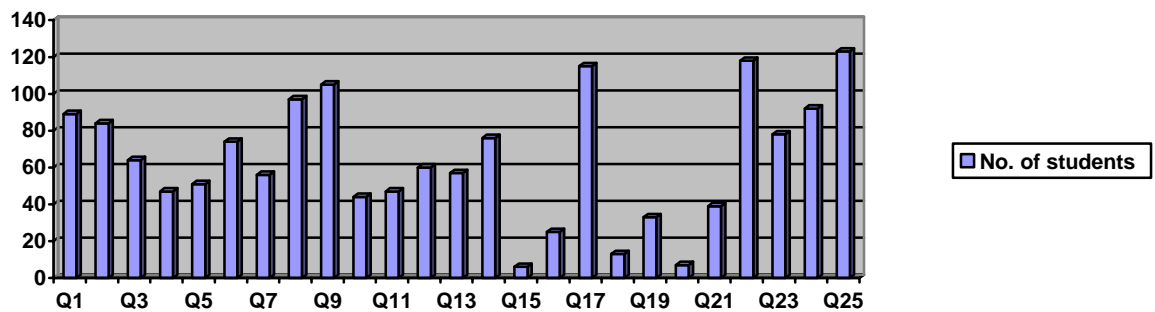


Fig. 5 Responses of "strongly agree"

Table 2 Learning to Learn Skills

		SD	D	U	A	SA
1.	Able to set goals	1 (3)	2 (8)	14 (47)	55 (180)	28 (92)
2.	Able to self-motivate	1 (3)	2 (8)	10 (32)	60 (198)	27 (89)
3.	Able to self-manage time	1 (2)	4 (14)	16 (53)	58 (192)	21 (69)
4.	Able to manage stressful situations	2 (5)	5 (17)	18 (58)	61 (200)	15 (50)
5.	Better concentrate on studies	2	6	17	59	17

		(5)	(19)	(55)	(194)	(57)
6.	Use correct reading techniques	2 (7)	5 (15)	20 (66)	58 (193)	15 (49)
7.	Make good study notes	1 (4)	6 (20)	18 (61)	59 (194)	15 (51)
8.	Able to write better assignments	3 (9)	4 (14)	14 (45)	60 (197)	20 (65)
9.	Know how to acknowledge sources of work in written assignment	1 (3)	4 (14)	13 (44)	63 (207)	19 (62)
10.	Know how to cite references	2 (5)	3 (11)	13 (42)	58 (191)	25 (81)
11.	Don't know learning style	20 (67)	49 (162)	15 (48)	14 (46)	2 (7)
12.	Know how to use memorization skills	2 (6)	10 (32)	24 (78)	56 (186)	8 (28)
13.	Does not plagiarize	1 (2)	3 (11)	10 (33)	49 (161)	37 (123)

Note: Percentage (Numbers)

Table 3 : Basic ICT Skills For Learning

		SD	D	U	A	SA
1.	Able to use MS Word more effectively	2 (4)	8 (15)	18 (23)	47 (158)	25 (130)
2.	Able to use MS Excel more effectively	2 (5)	8 (26)	18 (60)	47 (154)	25 (83)
3.	Able to use MS Power-point more effectively	2 (5)	5 (15)	12 (38)	52 (173)	30 (99)

Note: Percentage (Numbers)

Table 4: Searching for Information

		SD	D	U	A	SA
1.	Able to effectively apply myLMS Skills	2 (5)	3 (11)	12 (40)	58 (191)	25 (83)
2.	Can get overview of content	1 (2)	2 (8)	8 (28)	70 (232)	18 (60)
3.	Know how to use Internet	2 (7)	5 (17)	7 (23)	53 (175)	33 (108)
4.	The course has given skills to actively participate in online discussions	2 (6)	5 (17)	8 (25)	50 (164)	36 (118)
5.	Difficulty to search for information	12 (41)	45 (148)	20 (65)	19 (63)	4 (13)
6.	Use skills learnt to access OUM Digital Library	6 (19)	14 (46)	28 (92)	42 (137)	11 (36)

Note: Percentage (Numbers)