

# **EFFICACY OF THE LEARNING SKILLS WORKSHOP ON NEW LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND PERSISTENCE IN OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA (OUM)**

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**Abstract:** *Improving the first semester learners' experience has been part of a broader set of initiatives to increase learner retention and achievement in Open University Malaysia (OUM). One set of challenges faced by OUM in this respect is to help learners develop appropriate expectations initially and then to ensure that the quality of learners' experience, once they are already in is as positive as it can possibly be. In meeting the challenges, the Centre for Student Affairs (CSA) at OUM has carefully crafted and designed several programmes which prepares them to be effective ODL learners.. This paper examines the efficacy of a Learning Skill Workshop (an orientation programme) on the new learners' academic performance, measured in terms of Grade Point Average (GPA) as well as their persistence in the programme, i.e. whether they go through the whole semester workload up to sitting for the final examination and followed through to the re-registration process and become an active learner in the subsequent semester. The study involves the collection of data of new learners who attend the Learning Skill Workshop, labeled as the "treatment" group and the remaining new learners who do not attend as the "control" group. The results indicate that the learning skill workshop has a positive impact on both learner performance as well as learner persistence. When the likelihood of success of the new learners is increased, so will their chances of completing their undergraduate education.*

**Key words:** Learning skills workshop, learner achievement, persistence, treatment and control groups,

## INTRODUCTION

The majority of Open University Malaysia's (OUM's) learners are mature working adults, some of whom have left education for many years and are now embarking on a part-time study. As part-time learners they have to juggle around multiple commitments and schedules in order to cope well with their studies. They are distributed throughout the fifty-three learning centres across the country, and being distant from the main administrative campus, there is always the risk of learners experiencing isolation and alienation from the institution, feeling of being deprived of the services and staff that can be of valuable assistance to them (Bennett, Priest and Macpherson, 1999). This sense of isolation can contribute to low motivation, instructional ineffectiveness, poor academic achievement, negative attitudes, overall dissatisfaction with the learning experience and high rates of attrition (Thompson, 1990). It can also be compounded if learners are not equipped in advance with a set of self-directed skills such as self-discipline, time management, learning independence, good planning and many others (Burak, 1993; Piskurich, 2002).

To address the foreseeable challenges that new learners may face on entering into OUM, the Centre for Student Affairs (CSA) introduces the Learning Skills Workshop (LSW), which focuses on promoting student achievement, success and persistence. The program was developed in collaboration with the counseling unit, faculties and learning centres and was structured to provide an array of information that allows learners to make informed decisions, establish realistic goals and assess their own circumstances. Activities include individual and small group counseling, study skill instruction, and individualized hands-on experience with some basic learning tools such as myLMS (OUM's e-learning platform) and Digital Library. Much of what is discussed is in the form of "a sharing of experiences"

between senior tutors/tutor counselors with students, and it is expected to assist students internalize successful learning behaviors, learn to use problem-solving skills, and to form social network/interactions with peers and staff. The small group approach in the conduct of activities is a deliberate attempt to initiate positive interactions between learners, peers and staff. The most natural step will be for learners to open up and discuss with each other, building and developing a community of distance learners, right from the first time they set foot in OUM.

Theoretically, such a programme should help new learners partly because it fosters social as well as academic integration into the institution and help learners align personal goals with institutional goals. Many universities all round the world, particularly in USA, Australia, UK, South Africa, etc. invest a huge amount of resources in various types of first year programmes, basically with a focus on increasing achievement and retention of first year learners. In addition, it has also been shown that there is a consistent relationship between academic achievement and retention, with higher performing learners persisting in their studies to a greater degree than their lower achieving cohorts (Kirby & Sharpe, 2001). Based on this premise, the Learning Skills Workshop, which is specifically designed to introduce new learners to the new world of open and distance learning is regularly conducted and monitored in an effort to increase learner success and persistence in OUM.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **(A) Learning Skills Workshop (LSW)**

The LSW is held every semester, one week before the semester begins. New learners are encouraged to attend this one-day orientation programme. The sessions are facilitated by lecturers/senior tutors/lead tutors/tutor counselors, and at some centres, assisted by trained peer counselors and voluntary senior learners and fellow alumni. The first session and a crucial one as well is the “getting to know your peers” session. Following that learners are introduced to the concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), and later going in detail about OUM, highlighting it as the first distance learning institution in the country, with its unique vision, mission, aspirations and expectations. Learners are then divided into smaller groups, so as to encourage active participation during the discussions, deliberations and group dynamics based on the five modules. Each session is facilitated by a lecturer / senior tutor / lead tutor / tutor counselor with or without the presence of a peer counselor / senior learner / fellow alumni. Facilitators are encouraged to create a friendly and a casual atmosphere, whereby learners are made to feel relaxed and involved in the hands-on sessions. Creating an interactive as well as an engaged session will most likely make learners feel that they have accomplished something very useful at the end of the programme.

### **(B) Subjects**

The participants of the workshop who represent the subjects of the study were 3264, 1001 and 1571 each from the Jan '06, May '06 and September '06 intakes respectively. They

are all first time registered learners from all learning centres, who are brought in to the 28 bigger and some of which are OUM's own centres to participate in the LSW. The subjects are adult learners, most of who are married, on full-time jobs, and in the 26 – 45 age group. They are registered in over thirty different programmes of study and a majority of them are taking three introductory courses, of which two are common to all. Though the nature of courses covered in their first semester is common, they are quite diverse in terms of entry qualifications and demographic profiles. In the workshop there are provided with a set of learning skills package.

### **(C) Learning skills package**

The learning skills package comprised of five different learning modules designed to help new learners understand the nature, expectations and requirements of open and distance learning at OUM. The learning skills package consists of power-point slides explaining:

- a) Self-motivation: This module aims to make learners aware of the energy that is within them and that they have to mobilize that energy to work for them.
- b) How to obtain good grades at OUM: This module guides learners to formulate strategies on how to obtain good grades by setting realistic targets for both the coursework and examinations.
- c) How to prepare a good term assignment: The module provides tips on how to write good assignments.
- d) Managing time: The module is an exercise in scheduling their work and study priorities for a typical week in order to achieve effective use of time.
- e) Techniques in note-taking: The module provides tips on effective note taking to help prepare learners for examinations.

### **(D) Instrumentation**

Two types of instruments were employed at various stages of the study. The first was an evaluation report that measures the perceived levels of effectiveness on the learning skills modules. The second was the results of the examination taken by learners in the semester in which the workshop was conducted to determine the degree of success of the counseling workshop. The progress of learners was monitored right through to sitting for the final examination at the end of the semester. In order to determine the re-registration status in the subsequent semester, their persistence was monitored by ensuring that their second semester results were in order.

The six items in the Evaluation Form include:

- a) Contents are useful to me
- b) Information shared commensurate with my level of understanding
- c) Activities and media are used effectively to convey useful information
- d) Printed materials are well organized
- e) Facilitators have shown appropriate depth of knowledge in the topics delivered
- f) Facilitators responded effectively to participants' queries

g) Time allocated for the sessions is sufficient

The participants were asked to mark 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree” for each of the above statements based on a five-point Likert Scale.

### **(E) Treatment versus control group**

This study used the Posttest-Only Control Group Design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). On the registration day, all new learners were informed and encouraged to attend the LSW, to be held one week before the first tutorial session. The learning Centre Directors will then strategize with their staff to ensure good turn up in the programme, by either calling each individual learner via phone/sms/emails or by putting up an announcement about the programme through the e-learning portal on OUM website. Those who responded positively and attended the workshop form the treatment group, while those who did not attend form the control group.

The treatment group was given about five hours of workshop time covering generic areas on the learning skills package. At the end of the workshop, learners were given the Evaluation Forms to record their reactions on each of the module discussed. The impact of the workshop was assumed to have direct consequences on the learners. Finally, the effectiveness of the workshop was measured according to the performance of the learners as reflected in their GPAs obtained in the examination following the workshop sessions. The examination sitting rate and the re-registration rate for both groups of learners were compared to determine the longer term impact of the LSW.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **A) The Long Term Impact of LSW**

Prior to the introduction of the LSW, when new learners turn up for the registration process, they will also go through a short half a day induction on matters pertaining to the university and all its administrative and academic policies and procedures. It is basically a one way communication, from the staff of the university to the new learners.

Taking note of the crucial importance of social and academic integration in learners' retention/persistence, CSA introduced the LSW to new learners beginning in the May 2005 semester. The elements covered in the LSW focus on the two aspects related to social and academic integration. Though the one-day programme is not made compulsory, all new learners are encouraged to attend, so that they are mentally and physically well equipped to face the new challenges of becoming an open and distance learner at OUM.

Table 1 below shows the percentage of new learners attending the LSW by semester. Generally about 65% attend the LSW, and the trend has been consistent since LSW was initially introduced in 2005.

Table 1: Attendance of New Learners in LSW by Semester Intake

Semester Intake	Total New Learners	Attended LSW (Treatment)	Did Not Attend LSW (Control)
January 2006	5086	3264 (64.1%)	1822 (35.8%)
May 2006	1540	1001 (65.0%)	539 (35.0%)
September 2006	2387	1571 (65.8%)	816 (34.2%)

The names of participants of the LSW were noted and keyed in to the Retention Management System, immediately after the programme has been conducted. All participants form the treatment group, and learners who did not turn up form the control group. As soon as the examination results of the Jan, May and September 2006 intakes were released, a print out of the data from the retention management system was obtained. Analyses of the data by the two different groups were carried out, and the results obtained are as shown in Table 2. Despite of a major difference in the length of the January/September semesters compared to the short May semester, the percentage of learners securing a grade point average (GPA) greater than 2.0 is quite consistent over the three semesters. Among the treatment group, an average of 84% attains a GPA > 2.0, while for the control group, an average of 73% attains a GPA > 2.0.

Table 2: Percentage of learners with GPA>2.0, sitting for examination and re-registering

Achievement / Persistence	Treatment group (%)			Control group (%)		
	Jan '06	May '06	Sept '06	Jan '06	May '06	Sept '06
GPA > 2.0	86.2	80.0	84.9	74.8	71.8	71.7
Sit for examination	94.6	96.4	95.4	79.8	86.8	92.4
Re-register	84.0	76.3	81.7	63.0	66.2	70.9

Upon official release of the semester results, the percentages of learners sitting for the final examinations were calculated. Table 2 indicates that a consistently high average of 95% of learners who attended the LSW sit for their examinations as compared to an average of 86% among those who did not attend do so.

Using the retention management system, the data was retrieved after the official release of the second semester results. Learners having the second semester grades are considered as re-registered, while those without grades are considered not re-registered in the semester subsequent to the intervention. A similar trend was observed in the learners' persistence

pattern; an average of 81% of the treatment group re-registers while only 67% among the control group do so.

Other than merely comparing the results between the treatment and the control groups, it is also useful to look at the impact of the LSW on the overall intake population. Table 3 shows the overall impact of LSW on the total intakes from the point of view of persistence. For the total 5086 intake in January 2006, 89.4% sit for the final examination, out of which 60.8% is from the treatment group and 28.6% from the control group. In the following May semester, out of the total intake of 1540, 93.1% sit for the final examination, of which 62.7% is from the treatment group. Similarly, for the September intake of 2387, 94.4% sit for the examination of which 62.8% is from the treatment group and 31.6% from the control group.

Table 3: Impact of LSW on overall intake population (% sitting for examination)

Semester Intake	% Sitting for Examination (ALL)	Treatment group (%)	Control group (%)
January 2006	89.4	60.8	28.6
May 2006	93.1	62.7	30.4
September 2006	94.4	62.8	31.6

Table 4 shows a considerably lower percentage of persistence, measured in terms of re-registered learners. The average percentage of learners sitting for examination is 92%, while the average percentage re-registering is only about 75%. The differences in the results posted in Table 3 and Table 4 reflect the gap between learners who are active in January 2006, May 2006 and September 2006 respectively (Table 3), with those who are active in May 2006, September 2006 and January 2007 (Table 4) respectively. The calculated average figure of **15%** for the gap actually represents the attrition rate among the 2006 new learners. This figure is definitely a cause for alarm.

Table 4: Impact of LSW on overall intake population (% re-registering)

Semester Intake	% Re-registering (ALL)	Treatment group (%)	Control group (%)
January 2006	76.5	53.9	22.6
May 2006	72.8	49.6	23.2
September 2006	78.0	53.7	24.3

Lastly, and most important of all is to look at the immediate performance of learners in terms of their semester GPA. Generally, 66% to 76% of first time learners secure a GPA >2.0 with or without the intervention. Out of the above figures, 45% to 53% are from the treatment group, and the remainder from the control group.

Table 5: Impact of LSW on overall intake population (% getting GPA>2.0)

Semester Intake	% With GPA> 2.0 (ALL)	Treatment group (%)	Control group (%)
January 2006	65.9	44.5	21.4
May 2006	71.9	50.1	21.8
September 2006	76.0	53.3	22.7

As soon as learners get to view their first semester results, those who attain a GPA < 2.0, are automatically reminded of their probation status (generated by the system) and encouraged to contact the Deans of Faculty for appropriate advice and guidance. However, it is observed that under-performing learners lack the help-seeking behaviour, and in view of this CSA goes one step further by introducing intrusive academic advising/counseling. Intrusive advising has many advantages. Of particular importance is the positive effect the use of such advising approaches has on *retention rates* and *increased number of credit hours completed* (Bray, 1985 & Brophy, 1984) and *increased GPA* demonstrated by learners (Schultz, 1989; Spears, 1990). Intrusive advising encourages learners to keep up with their work, because they know that they are being watched by their tutor counselor. They are assured of receiving necessary connections to relevant support services, thus conveying the message that someone at the institution cares about them.

The list of names of “at risk” learners (GPA <2.0) are sent to the various learning centres, to enable the local tutor counselor/advisor to personally call them and arrange for an appointment to discuss about their study plans. All meetings between a learner and an academic advisor/counselor are recorded and followed up (OUM’s Academic Advising/Counseling Process). The monitoring is done right through the semester up to re-registration and completion of their study in the following semester.

## B) The Perceived Level of Effectiveness of LSW

An evaluation form was given out to all participants at the end of the LSW. The evaluation results are as shown in Table 6, showing the perceived levels of effectiveness of the learning skills package.

Table 6: Overall participants’ evaluation of the LSW

NO.	ITEMS	SCORE*
1	Contents are useful to me	3.6
2	Information shared commensurate with level of understanding	3.6
3	Activities and media are used effectively to convey the information	3.5
4	Printed material are well organized	3.4
5	Facilitator has shown appropriate depth of knowledge in the topic delivered	3.6
6	Facilitator responded effectively to participants' queries	3.5
7	Time allocated for the sessions is sufficient	3.0



\* Score was based on 1- 5 Likert Scale, 1: “strongly disagree” to 5: “strongly agree”

Generally, responses of the participants of the LSW are quite positive in almost all aspects of the evaluation, except for “the time allocated for the session”. They also express satisfaction with the facilitators and the contents.

The results of this study serves as an empirical evidence of the positive impact of the LSW on learner achievement and persistence in OUM, and parallels the results obtained by UNC which runs its SOAR (Student Orientation Advising and Registration) programme on to its first year learners, the results of which are as indicated in Table 7.

Table 7: Impact of LSW (OUM) versus impact of SOAR (UNC)  
<http://www.uncc.edu/stuaffairs/research.htm>

<b>OUM (LSW)</b>	<b>Re-register (retained 1 semester)</b>	<b>UNC (SOAR)</b>	<b>Freshman (retained 1 year)</b>
Attend (treatment)	84%	Attend (treatment)	77%
Did not attend (control)	63%	Did not attend (control)	66%

Whatever impact the LSW would have, it should be reflected in the overall status of all first time learners. Table 8 indicates that the percentage of new learners sitting for examination and the percentage of learners with GPA>2.0 for all three intakes have increased steadily. However, the percentage re-registering declined somewhat between January and May semesters but started to pick up from May to September semesters.

Table 8: Overall Status of 2006 New Learners

<b>Achievement/Persistence</b>	<b>Jan 06</b>	<b>May 06</b>	<b>Sept 06</b>
GPA > 2.0	65.9	71.9	76.0
Sit for Examination	89.4	93.1	94.4
Re-Register	76.5	72.8	78.0

There may be other non-academic factors which contribute to learners’ decisions on whether to re-register or not re-register the following semester, thus explaining the irregular pattern observed in this particular case. This is indeed supported by the findings of Szulecka et al (1987) in a large scale survey of first year learners at University of Nottingham, that emotional factors were more significant than academic pressures or intellectual difficulties in predicting student withdrawal (not re-registering).

## CONCLUSION

This impact of the LSW on new learners' achievement and persistence is quite promising and further refinement to the contents and delivery of the learning skills package will certainly pay dividends and will greatly contribute towards OUM's learner achievement and retention. Besides making learners aware of their responsibilities as ODL learners, they are also made aware of the different types of support services that are made available to them. The empirical evidence on the effectiveness of LSW renders it as a compulsory activity for all new comers to the university. This programme encourages learners to participate fully in academic life and in seeing their time in higher education as a holistic experience where they can grow both intellectually and emotionally. Investment in a programme of this nature will be repaid by a resultant saving in learner fees (better retention) and by an improvement in the quality of learner experience.

The following recommendations are made to improve further the positive impact of LSW on learner achievement and persistence:

- a) Faculty staff / lead tutors / tutor counselors to be exposed to a comprehensive need assessment designed to identify deficits in the existing knowledge bases of academic advisors. This would result in specific topics being identified and workshops being provided that would enhance the academic advising of new learners.
- b) To develop a website on OUM homepage devoted specifically to new learners. This site might include a range of on-line information, services, and interactive elements, so that they are aware of the benefits of the programmes that OUM offers, such as the LSW.
- c) To compile information from incoming new learners to ensure a comprehensive database. Such a database would facilitate long-range planning and decision-making about learner needs/services. Another important component of this database would be to develop sensitive questionnaires designed to capture a range of relevant concerns (e.g., time management strategies, academic goals, potential problems anticipated).
- d) To conduct longitudinal research on the impact of LSW on learner success and retention so as to accommodate changes in the learner characteristics as well as institutional changes in moving towards a more holistic learners' experience in OUM.

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