PRIORITY-SATISFACTION SURVEY:
A TOOL IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE RETENTION STRATEGIES

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Abstract

One of the ongoing efforts of the Centre for Student Affairs, Open University Malaysia (OUM), is to coordinate retention initiatives across all departments of the university. For these initiatives to be effective, they must incorporate feedback from students. Students come to the university with a certain set of goals and expectations. When these goals and expectations are met, the student retention rate is likely to be high. OUM must not only identify these goals and expectations, but more importantly, it must ensure that they are adequately met. One of the tools to achieve this is the Priority-Satisfaction Survey where students are asked to rank the support services provided by OUM in terms of their importance and level of satisfaction. The paper reports the results of the Priority-Satisfaction Survey conducted on all cohorts of OUM student in its 27 learning centres throughout the country. This two-dimensional survey gathers information on six different types of services using the 7-point Likert Scale. A performance gap analysis is carried out to identify areas that need improvements. In addition, a Priority-Satisfaction Matrix is constructed to determine OUM's strengths and weaknesses. The results of the current survey are compared with those of a similar survey done in the previous year to ensure continuous evaluation of the quality of the services provided. Based on the above analysis, recommendations on retention initiatives are presented to OUM's management.

Introduction

Open University Malaysia (OUM) started its operations in 2001 with its first modest intake of 753 students. Since then, yearly enrollment figures increased in record breaking numbers, giving a present enrollment figure of more than 29,000. As the numbers multiply, so too the challenges confronting it—challenges that compel it to continually assess its position and options. These challenges are varied and complex. Being a young institution, it is vital that OUM continues to maintain high student enrollment and retention rates. One measure of success of OUM is its ability to retain its learners until they complete their programmes and graduate. OUM started well with an ambitious set of goals for student enrollment and

recognized that creating a learner-centered environment – that is placing "learner success" and "learner service" at the center of the institution – produces an academic environment that will lead to high academic achievement and high retention rates. In this regard, OUM must continually assess the quality of the support services that it provided to its learners to ensure that they are fully satisfied with them.

Purpose of the Study

Learner support services are integral to a quality and full learning experience; they play a crucial role in providing academic, social, and personal support to learners to enable them to succeed in their learning journey. The majority of distance learners are working adults who are new to open and distance learning and have to battle with the practicalities of returning to study. Most adult learners are uncertain of what distance learning experiences entail and what their role as a learner will be. They also often encounter problems such as: lack of prompt feedback on their queries, whether via emails or telephones; technical difficulties, feelings of isolation, lack of personal face-to-face interaction, lack of self-direction and motivation, amongst others. These set of experiences are not new to ODL institutions; in fact these items represent some of the commonly identified ODL retention challenges.

This study seeks to:

1. Identify the *priorities* learners place on the various items that are contained in the six dimensions of the learner support services provided by OUM;
2. Determine the learners' *level of satisfaction* for each of the above items;
3. Determine the performance gap for each of the items and dimensions;
4. Identify OUM's strengths (high priority - high satisfaction) and weaknesses (high priority - low satisfaction) in providing the support services;
5. Recommend to the management on areas that need improvement.

Literature review

It is an established fact that attrition in distance learning environments tend to be high (Tate and Mills, 2001). As a result, researchers and practitioners are formulating strategies to try to minimize it (Dunlap, 1993).

There had been no specific study that had shown the cause and effect relationship between satisfaction and retention (Weckman, 1999). Proving cause and effect relationships is difficult at best and nearly impossible in academic settings where controlled experimental procedures cannot be put in place. Studies such as this can only show that certain learner attitudes and experiences tend to correlate more or less with their decision to stay or leave the institution.

However, the strength of the association between retention and satisfaction suggests that to improve its retention rates, an institution should focus more attention on learner satisfaction. Tinto (1975) was among the first to investigate the relationship between learners' satisfaction and retention. He found that retention is closely associated with learner satisfaction with their learning experiences. Successful completion of and satisfaction with an academic experience is directly related to students' sense of belonging and connection to the programme and courses. He also found that "social interaction via friendship support is directly related to

persistence."

Others found that institutions need to provide adequate support to their learners to ensure that they continue to be motivated and remain in the learning system. Some students in distance learning programmes faced frustration because they do not possess the skills needed to be successful (Wayland, Swift, Wilson, 1994). The lack of self-directed skills, such as self-discipline, self-manage learning, time management, ability to develop plans for study, and many others could add on to their feeling of isolation (Latifah, Ramli, Zoraini Wati & Nik Azlina, 2004). Learners are expected to take charge and be responsible for their own learning and this particular skill is normally developed in a social context, through peers, tutors and the community of learners (Kerka, 1994).

Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) assert that when students undergo a satisfying and a rewarding learning experience, it will most likely lead to greater integration and hence improved student retention rate.

Bird and Morgan, who studied on issues facing adult learners, argued that the more effective the institution become at providing information, guidance and preparation of potential adult distance learners, the more likely students will experience a smooth transition to study, thus improving student satisfaction and retention rates (Bird and Morgan, 2003).

The issue of attrition is complicated and multi-causal. It is found that in many cases, the significant contributing factor to attrition is the weakness in the relationship between learners and the institution. (Garland, 1993; Morgan and Tam, 1999)

Based on the above, therefore, to minimize the attrition rate, an institution's direct intervention is very important. One of the means of intervention is to provide high quality support services. The next issue is how determine the quality of its services. In this regard, it has to gather feedback from the students themselves, to see if there is any need for changes in the existing services, and/or for new services to be developed. Some institutions have undertaken student focus groups or have conducted student satisfaction surveys as a means of getting feedback.

Traditionally, learners' satisfaction is measured uni-dimensionally, that is using learners' satisfaction scores. However, for greater reliability and accuracy, learners' satisfaction should be viewed in the context of their priorities or expectations.

The first of these studies was carried out in 1995. It employs the Student Satisfaction Inventory developed by Noel-Levitz in 1993 to study students in a traditional campus environment (Noel-Levitz and CAEL, 2003). The inventory which measures two dimensions of students satisfaction and student priorities was able to identify which aspects of campus services that students consider as most important and which they are most satisfied with and vice versa.

In 1999, a study was carried out to identify the priorities and satisfaction of students staying in two residential colleges of the University of Malaya (Latifah and Ramli, 1999) on services and facilities provided by the colleges. A priority satisfaction matrix was effectively used to determine areas for further improvements.

A similar Priority-Satisfaction survey was conducted on OUM learners in August 2003, and

the results of that survey showed that, in general OUM has done well in meeting the needs of the learners. Eight out of nine support services represent OUM's strengths. Digital library is the only item that falls in the high priority-low satisfaction quadrant, and this renders digital library as OUM's weakness, (Latifah & Ramli, 2004).

Methodology

The Instrument

The study uses the traditional survey method. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: (i) the background of learner-respondents, (ii) the priorities they place on each of the items and their levels of satisfaction and (iii) one open ended question.

The questionnaires were sent out by e-mail to the Administrators of each of the 28 Learning Centers and were distributed during the last Tutorial Session of the August 2004 Semester.

The Data

The set of survey questions and a cover letter were distributed to learners in randomly selected classes in the various learning centres. A soft copy of the cover letter and the set of questions were also given to the Administrators via electronic. 3,540 or 70.8% of the total of 5,000 survey forms were completed and used for the study.

The Variables and Data Collection

Part I of the questionnaire attempts to collect the demographic data of the learners. These information include: Gender; Age; Ethnic group; Marital status; Programme of study; Active Semester; CGPA; Source of Finance; Name of Learning Centre; Distance between Home and Learning Centre; Job Sector and Monthly Income

Part II of the questionnaires seeks to collect information on the priorities of learners and their levels of satisfaction on each of the 68 items. The items were grouped into six dimensions as follows: Students Record Management; Registration and Orientation; Learner Centeredness; Student Affairs Management; Assessment Management and Teaching and Learning (See Appendix A).

Reliability and validity tests were runned on the data for all items in each of the dimensions, based on priority and satisfaction.

(a)   Reliability Test: Internal consistency for each of the dimensions was measured utilizing *Cronbach's alpha* on both priority and satisfaction scores. Table 1 shows the coefficient alpha estimates for each dimension; and the overall Cronbach's alpha value for priority scores is 0.982 and for satisfaction scores is 0.976.

Table 1
REALIBILITY TEST FOR PRIORITY AND SATISFCATION DIMENSIONS

No.	Dimension	Priority	Satisfaction
1	Management of Students Record	0.891	0.833
2	Registration and Orientation	0.849	0.831
3	Learner Centredness	0.948	0.927
4	Student Affairs Department	0.919	0.917
5	Assessment	0.95	0.924
6	Teaching and Learning	0.932	0.912
	Overall	0.982	0.976

(b)　　Validity Test: To test the validity of each of the dimensions, a Pearson Correlation Test was conducted for each dimension used in this study. The results of the Pearson Correlation showed that, in terms of Priority, items in each dimension showed high convergent validity (significant at $p < 0.001$). In terms of satisfaction, the Pearson Correlation showed that items in each dimension showed high convergent validity (significant at $p < 0.001$).

Learners were then presented with positive statements on each of the items and were asked to indicate:

(a)　　Importance score ratings which reflect how strongly students feel about the importance of a particular item (the higher the score, the more important it is to the student). A 7-point Likert Scale was employed with 1 indicating the lowest and 7 the highest in importance.

(b)　　Satisfaction score ratings which show how satisfied students are with a particular item (the higher the score, the higher the level of satisfaction of the student). A similar 7-point Likert Scale was employed with 1 indicating most unsatisfactory and 7 as most satisfactory.

(c)　　Performance gap scores measure the difference between an item's importance score ratings and its satisfaction score ratings. The study categorises performance gap scores into three groups, namely, large, medium and small. A performance gap score is defined as *large* when the difference between an item's importance score and its satisfaction score is equal to or greater than positive 1, *medium* when the difference is between positive 0.50 to positive 0.99 and *small* when the difference is less than positive 0.50. A large performance gap score for an item indicates that learners' expectations are not being met. Conversely, a small gap score indicates that students' expectations are being met. A negative gap score indicates that students' expectations are being exceeded.

Results of Study

Part I: Profile of Respondents

The total number of respondents is 3,540 which represent 18% of the total number of active students at the time of the survey. The complete profile of respondents is given in Appendix B. A majority of the respondents are females (55.5%), in the 26-35 years of age (47.7%), Malays (67.6%), married (74.2%), in the 1st – 4th semester of study (54.5%), with CGPA of 2.01-3.00 (55.1%), under the special OUM-MOE programmes receiving the special loan (35.5%), staying 30 km or less from their learning centres (52.0%), working in the government sector (69.7%), and earning between RM1,000-RM2,000 per month (65.4%).

Part IIA: Priority and Satisfaction Ratings by individual items

A) Priority Rating:

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of priority ratings for all the 68 items. The mean scores range from the lowest score of 4.61 to the highest of 6.19.

What are important to OUM learners?

Overall, learners rate all items between marginally important to important (mean scores of 4.61 – 6.11). The five most important items appear to be (i) I am proud of being a student of OUM (mean score 6.19); (ii) I receive my course module on the orientation day (6.12); (iii) Online examination results are accurate (6.11); (iv) Previous examination questions are useful (6.11); and (v) The face-to-face tutorials are effective (6.08).

What are not important to OUM learners?

The following five items are accorded lowest importance: (i) Payment for additional tutorial is reasonable (mean score 4.61); (ii) Student's co-curricular activities are important to me (4.92); (iii) The orientation programme for the new students would be more effective with involvement of senior students (4.96); (iv) OUM's student clubs are important to me (5.06) and (v) The orientation programme for new students is effective (5.11)

B) Satisfaction Rating:

Table 3 also shows the means and standard deviations of satisfaction scores for all the 68 items. The mean scores range from the lowest score of 4.11 to the highest of 5.93.

What are OUM learners most satisfied with?

The five items that are accorded highest satisfaction appear to be: (i) I am proud of being a student of OUM (mean score 5.93); (ii) Staggered payment of fees lessen my financial burden (5.73); (iii) The face-to-face tutorials are effective (5.69); (iv) I receive my course module on the orientation day (5.58) and (v) The tutors are caring and helpful (5.65).

Table 2: Priority, Satisfaction and Performance Gap (PG) Scores by Items

No. Item	Priority				Satisfaction				PG
	N Valid	Missing	Mean	SD	N Valid	Missing	Mean	SD	
1 Information regarding credit transfer is clear	3,160	380	5.70	1.449	3,307	233	4.70	1.672	1.00
2 Duration for credit tansfer is reasonable	3,099	441	5.55	1.421	3,232	308	4.70	1.542	0.85
3 My personal information in the online profile is accurate	3,180	360	6.08	1.238	3,407	133	5.52	1.522	0.56
4 Online registration is convenient to me	3,172	368	6.06	1.246	3,412	128	5.61	1.441	0.44
5 Choosing tutorial slots online is convenient to me	3,158	382	5.78	1.412	3,397	143	5.13	1.677	0.65
6 Online examination results are accurate	3,135	405	6.11	1.168	3,363	177	5.52	1.441	0.59
7 Duration for getting the matric card is reasonable	3,152	388	5.52	1.476	3,403	137	4.77	1.763	0.75
8 My financial statement is accurate	3,072	468	5.83	1.400	3,315	225	5.03	1.667	0.80
9 Course information is accurate	3,152	388	6.00	1.195	3,386	154	5.39	1.383	0.61
10 The students' handbook is useful	3,165	375	5.96	1.243	3,393	147	5.45	1.368	0.51
11 Students' Registration process is brief	3,153	387	5.90	1.220	3,392	148	5.31	1.451	0.59
12 Registration staff is able to resolve my problems	3,138	402	5.69	1.376	3,408	132	4.84	1.587	0.85
13 The orientation programme for the new students is effective	3,090	450	5.11	1.558	3,318	222	4.58	1.493	0.53
14 Duration of orientation is reasonable	3,081	459	5.10	1.552	3,310	230	4.62	1.488	0.48
15 The orientation programme for the new students would be more effective with involvement of senior students	2,994	546	4.96	1.661	3,173	367	4.67	1.545	0.29
16 Staggered payment of fees lessen my financial burden	2,976	564	6.03	1.302	3,178	362	5.73	1.377	0.29
17 Payment of fees using the credit card is convenient	2,868	672	5.16	1.712	3,018	522	4.94	1.639	0.22
18 I receive my course module on the orientation day	3,059	481	6.12	1.229	3,320	220	5.68	1.480	0.43
19 My problems are attended to immediately	3,047	493	5.65	1.435	3,300	240	4.75	1.628	0.90
20 Problems channeled via phone are handled satisfactorily	3,031	509	5.47	1.534	3,284	256	4.47	1.708	1.00
21 Problems channeled via emails are handled satisfactorily	3,004	536	5.58	1.399	3,285	255	4.68	1.589	0.89
22 I acquire latest information through the announcement in the OUM website	3,046	494	5.88	1.247	3,330	210	5.31	1.414	0.57
23 Administrators are easily contactable	3,022	518	5.57	1.467	3,312	228	4.62	1.662	0.95
24 Administrators do resolve my problems	3,007	533	5.59	1.388	3,296	244	4.75	1.540	0.84
25 The Learning Centre staff is helpful	3,029	511	5.75	1.272	3,317	223	5.06	1.469	0.68
26 OUM staff is caring and helpful	3,019	521	5.73	1.264	3,297	243	5.00	1.465	0.73

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	N Valid	Missing	Mean	SD	N Valid	Missing	Mean	SD	
1 Information regarding credit transfer is clear	3,160	380	5.70	1.449	3,307	233	4.70	1.672	1.00
2 Duration for credit tansfer is reasonable	3,099	441	5.55	1.421	3,232	308	4.70	1.542	0.85
27 I am proud of being a student of OUM	3,049	491	6.19	1.108	3,320	220	5.93	1.234	0.26
28 OUM cares about me as an individual	3,008	532	5.76	1.260	3,290	250	5.11	1.418	0.65
29 The tutors are caring and helpful	3,049	491	6.08	1.141	3,325	215	5.65	1.255	0.43
30 Student's co-curricular activities are important to me	2,934	606	4.92	1.693	3,155	385	4.55	1.584	0.36
31 OUM's student clubs are important to me	2,943	597	5.06	1.587	3,159	381	4.60	1.561	0.45
32 Penalty imposed on cases of plagiarism is heavy	2,990	550	5.70	1.294	3,234	306	5.33	1.352	0.37
33 Penalty imposed on examination breaches is heavy	2,993	547	5.90	1.217	3,239	301	5.54	1.334	0.36
34 Meeting of students with Student Affairs representative is effective	2,946	594	5.50	1.373	3,199	341	4.81	1.479	0.69
35 Skills training (eg. computer, English, writing) is important to me	3,011	529	6.00	1.222	3,232	308	5.32	1.503	0.68
36 Counseling workshops increase my motivation level	2,950	590	5.49	1.430	3,166	374	4.87	1.551	0.62
37 Additional tutorial sessions are required	2,984	556	5.89	1.304	3,194	346	5.33	1.480	0.56
38 Payment for additional tutorial is reasonable	2,897	643	4.61	1.904	3,110	430	4.11	1.797	0.50
39 Learning centre services are satisfactory	2,956	584	5.54	1.357	3,238	302	4.90	1.469	0.64
40 The counseling workshop makes me aware of my study problems	2,842	698	5.29	1.433	3,069	471	4.71	1.485	0.58
41 Course counseling is required	2,828	712	5.32	1.403	3,049	491	4.74	1.458	0.58
42 I can manage my time well	2,931	609	5.61	1.291	3,210	330	4.96	1.339	0.65
43 The meeting sessions between students and tutors, administrators and staff at the learning centres are beneficial	2,945	595	5.84	1.211	3,200	340	5.30	1.394	0.55
44 Time given for preparing assignment is sufficient	2,985	555	5.71	1.371	3,284	256	4.91	1.532	0.81
45 The location of the examination hall is appropriate	2,963	577	5.87	1.254	3,255	285	5.27	1.455	0.60
46 Information regarding examination schedule is accurate	2,977	563	6.04	1.134	3,264	276	5.61	1.296	0.43
47 Examination scheduling is suitable	2,981	559	5.94	1.237	3,265	275	5.38	1.422	0.56
48 Previous examination questions are useful	2,981	559	6.11	1.157	3,246	294	5.61	1.372	0.49
49 Allocation of 5% OLP is reasonable	3,004	536	5.88	1.411	3,274	266	5.46	1.578	0.42
50 Time given to read the questions in an examination is helpful	2,973	567	6.04	1.142	3,261	279	5.60	1.329	0.45

No. Item	Priority				Satisfaction				PG
	N Valid	Missing	Mean	SD	N Valid	Missing	Mean	SD	
1 Information regarding credit transfer is clear	3,160	380	5.70	1.449	3,307	233	4.70	1.672	1.00
2 Duration for credit tansfer is reasonable	3,099	441	5.55	1.421	3,232	308	4.70	1.542	0.85
51 Time given to answer the examination questions are appropriate	2,964	576	5.99	1.178	3,263	277	5.42	1.388	0.57
52 Tutor feedback in the TMA form is useful	2,932	608	5.88	1.172	3,192	348	5.45	1.280	0.43
53 Assignments help me understand the module content	2,982	558	6.02	1.094	3,269	271	5.64	1.198	0.38
54 The grades of Tests 1 and 2 achieved determines my understanding	2,994	546	5.98	1.109	3,278	262	5.61	1.193	0.37
55 Tutors feedback on performance of test 1 and 2 is helpful	2,977	563	6.01	1.108	3,244	296	5.59	1.218	0.42
56 Meetings with the Directors/Administrators is helpful	2,907	633	5.38	1.495	3,121	419	4.77	1.564	0.60
57 The LCs have sufficient computers that are internet linked	2,927	613	5.41	1.644	3,204	336	4.31	1.829	1.10
58 The digital library is important to me	2,965	575	5.67	1.393	3,231	309	4.94	1.589	0.72
59 Forum in myLMS helps me in my studies	3,009	531	5.90	1.253	3,289	251	5.40	1.398	0.50
60 The online information in myCourse is helpful	2,991	549	5.95	1.163	3,264	276	5.49	1.311	0.46
61 Responses from tutors in the online forum is satisfactory	2,983	557	5.82	1.271	3,280	260	5.20	1.426	0.61
62 The modules are useful for self-managed learning	2,988	552	6.03	1.151	3,273	267	5.53	1.327	0.50
63 The CD-ROM is useful in understanding the module contents	2,851	689	5.53	1.440	3,076	464	4.84	1.620	0.70
64 The face-to-face tutorials are effective	2,976	564	6.08	1.103	3,254	286	5.69	1.222	0.38
65 "Personalized learning" suits my needs	2,868	672	5.58	1.372	3,115	425	5.06	1.468	0.52
66 The present tutorial scheduling is appropriate	2,953	587	5.84	1.258	3,254	286	5.26	1.456	0.59
67 Tutorial schedule after office hours is acceptable	2,925	615	5.34	1.692	3,208	332	4.75	1.809	0.59
68 Faculty staff cares about my academic performance	2,908	632	5.49	1.397	3,186	354	4.78	1.523	0.71

What are OUM learners least satisfied with?

The following five items are accorded the lowest satisfaction: (i) Payment for additional tutorial is reasonable (mean score 4.11); (ii) Learning Centres have sufficient computers that are internet linked (4.31); (iii) Problems channeled via phone are handled satisfactorily (4.47); (iv) Students' co-curricular activities are important to me (4.55) and (v) The orientation programme for the new students is effective (4.58).

C) The Performance Gap Score

The performance gap scores for each of the 68 items are shown in Table 2. Only three items have a large performance gap. They are: (i) Learning Centres have sufficient computers that are Internet-linked; (ii) Information regarding credit transfer is clear; and (iii) Problems channeled via phone are handled satisfactorily. Two items, namely, (i) Administrators are easily contactable; and (ii) Duration for credit transfer is reasonable, have medium performance gap scores. The rest of the items have low performance gap scores.

Part IIB: Priority and Satisfaction Ratings by Dimensions

Table 3 shows the Priority Means, Satisfaction Means and Performance Gap Scores of the six dimensions.

Table 3
Priority Means, Satisfaction Means and Performance Gap Scores by Dimension

Dimension	Priority	Satisfaction	Performance Gap
1. Assessment Effectiveness	5.94	5.42	0.52
2. Management of Students' Record	5.85	5.15	0.69
3. Learner Centeredness	5.75	5.03	0.72
4. Teaching and Learning	5.73	5.15	0.59
5. Registration and Orientation Effectiveness	5.56	5.09	0.47
6. Student Affairs	5.45	4.91	0.54

A) Priority Ratings

The top three dimensions that are most important to OUM learners are: (i) Assessment Effectiveness (5.94); (ii) Management of Students' Records (5.85); and (iii) Learner Centeredness (5.75).

B) Satisfaction Ratings

Learners are most satisfied with the following three dimensions: (i) Assessment Effectiveness (5.42); (ii) Management of Students' Records and (iii) Teaching and Learning.

C) Performance Gap Scores

The performance gap scores for all the six dimensions range between 0.47 and 0.72. This indicates that learners' expectations are being met in all dimensions. The small performance gap score for Registration and Orientation Effectiveness (0.47) means that students' expectations are being met, whilst the medium gap score for Learner Centeredness (0.72) implies that while learners' expectations are being met, they are not met as well as in other dimensions.

Part III: Priority – Satisfaction Matrix

Based on the data in Table 4, a Priority – Satisfaction Matrix is constructed as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

PRIORITY-SATISFACTION MATRIX
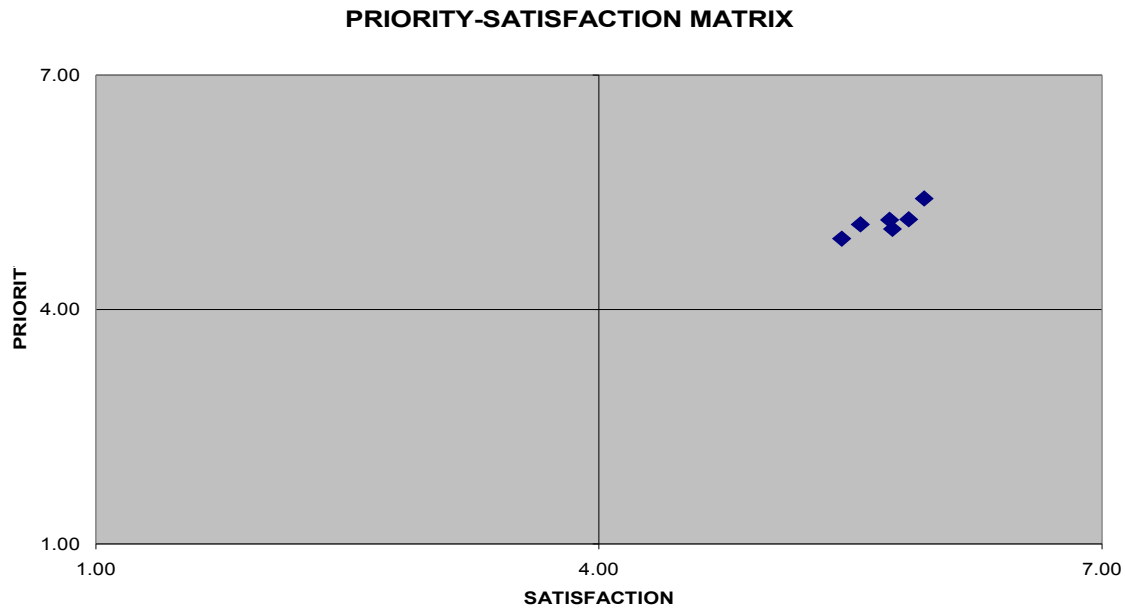
Discussion of Results

Figure 1 shows that all six dimensions are under the high priority-high satisfaction quadrant ("the strength quadrant"). This indicates that OUM is able to provide support services that are not only important to learners but the learners are also satisfied with those services. Though they appear to be OUM's strengths, the performance gap scores revealed that three of the six dimensions were accorded medium gap scores, which imply that they can be further improved upon. These dimensions are Learner Centeredness (0.72); Management of Students' Record (0.69); and Teaching and Learning (0.59).

Learner Centeredness assesses efforts to convey to students that they are important. It measures OUM's attitude toward students and vice versa, that is learners' perception of OUM. It is indeed gratifying to learn that learners are proud of being an OUM student (highest priority score and highest satisfaction score). However, the relatively high performance gap scores in a number of items in this dimension indicate that they need to be improved upon. These items are: i) Problems channeled via phone are handled satisfactorily (1.0); (ii) Administrators are easily contactable (0.95); (iii) My problems are attended to immediately (0.90); (iv) Problems channeled via emails are handled satisfactorily (0.89); (v) Administrators do resolve my problems (0.84); and (vi) OUM staff is caring and helpful (0.73). OUM strives to meet and delight its learners in order to sustain its high learner retention rate. One way to achieve this is through internalizing OUM's shared values and providing customer services training to all staff.

OUM's learners place a higher degree of importance to tutors (6.08) than to staff (5.73) and learning centre administrators (4.59). They are also more satisfied with tutors (5.65) than with staff (5.0) and administrators (4.75). The importance of tutors to learners is obvious since they are the ones who are closest to them and at the same time provide care and concern. The lower degree of importance and the corresponding lower level of satisfaction for staff may be attributed to the low level of interaction due to physical distance factor. The lower importance and satisfaction levels for the administrators is somewhat surprising since it is thought that an administrator would be the most important staff to learners, as their role is to assist learners in managing their studies. It appears that learners either do not appreciate the administrator's assistance or they expect more from their local Administrators.

Management of Students' Records encompasses items that provide information on learners in order to facilitate the administration of their academic and other matters. Four items in this dimension, with gap scores of greater than 0.50, warrant vigilant attention. They are: (i) Information regarding credit transfer is clear (gap score 1.00); Duration for credit transfer is reasonable (0.85); Financial statement is accurate (0.80); (iv) Duration for getting the metric card is reasonable (0.75).

OUM had paid a lot of attention in the four items mentioned above. However, this study indicates that they still need to be further addressed. Information pertaining to credit transfer has been addressed by giving widespread information, both in print and electronic forms, to learners. Duration for getting a matric card should no longer be an issue, because processing of card is now decentralized to the learning centres. There are also the financial issues where learners'

loans are not deposited in on time, learners taking their own time to pay up their fees and learners make their payment via bank accounts but the banks' pay-in slip comes in late. These are some of the finance- related issues that affect the financial statement of learners. All of the above issues may appear petty, but they can be very annoying and distracting, and sometimes posing as hindrances in the course of their learning. Some of these issues are beyond the control of OUM while others are. For those it can control, OUM will continuously improve them so as to make it most convenient for learners.

Teaching and Learning incorporate items which have a direct impact on students' learning. Four items in this dimension deserve further attention: (i) Learning Centres have sufficient computers that are Internet linked; (ii) Digital library is important to me; (iii) CD-ROM is useful in understanding the module contents; and (iv) Faculty staff care about my academic performance. These items have gaps greater than 0.50, i.e. learners' expectations of them are not met.

OUM maintains a network of thirty-three learning centres all over the country and they serve as the focal points for learners' academic activities. Some of these centres are owned by OUM while others are rented. OUM-owned centres are well equipped with appropriate facilities for learning. However, some rented premises are found to be lacking in some of these facilities, particularly sufficient number of Internet-linked computers.   OUM is currently taking steps to increase the number of Internet -linked computers either by purchasing or renting them from nearby premises.

The two items, Digital library and CD-ROMs also require some attention. The dissatisfaction with the digital library is most probably due to cultural readiness (unreadiness) rather than their accessibility. OUM has made the "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners" module compulsory for every new learner. However, learners appear not to take advantage of the full capabilities of the digital library (Latifah & Ramli, 2003). OUM may wish to seek more details on learners' priorities for library resources and services in order to cater to their needs. Some modules are accompanied with a CD-ROM, and the main purpose of the CD-ROM is to enhance learners' understanding of the course content. Unfortunately, learners seem to be taking an indifferent attitude towards these support materials that has been customized for them. Awareness on the importance of CD-ROMS should be increased and there should be some kind of monitoring of the effective use of the CD-ROMS provided.

The results of the study also indicate that learners expect more out of their academic staff. The relatively lower satisfaction level accorded to this item may be attributable to the low level of interaction between learners and academic staff which in turn may be due to the physical distance between them. While learners enjoy opportunities for involvement in OUM activities, these activities need to be expanded to involve the academic staff.

Conclusion

OUM is a learning organization seeking to improve itself in providing quality support services to its learners. In this regard, it continually strives for and devises effective tools and techniques to identify its strengths and weaknesses. The learners' priority-satisfaction analyses as a diagnostic

tool for improving institutional effectiveness is one tool that could be used towards this end. Using this tool, we have identified our learners' preferences and their satisfaction levels for the support services that OUM provides. The results of this study indicate that: (i) based on the priority scores; OUM had provided the services which are ***important*** to its learners. This is evidenced by the priority scores which are generally in the <u>high priority</u> category; (ii) the average satisfaction score which is at the <u>satisfactory</u> level indicates that OUM's support services are of ***reasonably high quality*** and (iii) a <u>medium</u> average performance gap score for all dimensions and clustering of all the services in the *high priority-high satisfaction quadrant* imply that in general, OUM had been ***effective*** in providing the support services to its learners. It is also gratifying to note the result of the present study indicates that Digital Library, which was previously found to be in the *high priority-low satisfaction* quadrant (Latifah & Ramli, 2004), is now in the *high priority-high satisfaction quadrant*. There has been an improvement in this area and OUM will continue to improve further in other areas in order to provide the supportive, learner-centred climate that learners expect from the university.

Finally, this study seeks to assist OUM in managing its retention strategies by taking the approach of (i) listening to students' concerns; (ii) recommending measures to improve learners' learning experiences; and (iii) documenting and monitoring institutional effectiveness. By using this approach it hopes to contribute towards increasing OUM's learner retention rate.

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APPENDIX A: Dimension Descriptions

No.	Dimension	Description
1	Student Record Management	Credit transfer; Duration for credit tansfer; Online personal information; Online registration; Online tutorial slots; Online examination results ; Matric card ; Financial statement and Course information

No.	Dimension	Description
2	Registration/Orientation Effectiveness	Students' handbook; Students' Registration; Staff are helpful; Registration staff is able to resolve problems; Orientation programme for the new students; Duration of orientation; Staggered payment of fees; Payment of fees using the credit card; Receive course module on the orientation day
3	Student Centeredness	Problems are attended to immediately; Problems channeled via phone & emails are handled satisfactorily; Latest information through the OUM website; Administrators are easily contactable; Administrators do resolve my problems; The Learning Centre staff is helpful; OUM staff is caring and helpful; Proud of being a student of OUM; OUM cares about me as an individual; The tutors are caring and helpful
4	Student Affairs Department	Co-curricular activities are important; Student clubs Penalty on plagiarism; Penalty on examination breaches; Skills training (computer, English, writing); Counseling workshops; Additional tutorial; Payment for additional tutorial; Learning centre services; The counseling workshop makes me aware of my study problems; Course counseling; Managing time; Students – tutors, administrators and staff meeting are beneficial
5	Assessment Effectiveness	Time for preparing assignment; Location of the examination hall; Information regarding examination schedule; Examination scheduling is suitable; Previous examination questions are useful; Allocation of 5% OLP is reasonable; Time given to read the questions in an examination is helpful; Time for answering examination questions are appropriate; Tutor feedback in the TMA form is useful; Assignments help me understand the module content; The grades of Tests 1 and 2 achieved determines my understanding
6	Teaching and Learning Effectiveness	Learning Centres (LCs): conducive; sufficient computers that are internet linked; reference books in; Digital library; Forum in myLMS; The online information in myCourse; Tutors in online forum; Modules; CD-ROM; Face-to-face tutorials; Personalized learning; Group study; Tutorial scheduling; Faculty staff cares about my academic performance

Appendix B: Profile of Respondents

1	Gender	Frequency	Percent
	Male	1,553	44.5
	Female	1,933	55.5
	Total	3,486	100.0

2	Age	Frequency	Percent
	18 years and below	11	0.3
	19 - 25 years	464	13.4
	26 - 35 years	1,650	47.7
	36 - 45 years	1,213	35.0
	46 years and above	124	3.6
	Total	3,462	100.0

3	Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percent
	Malay	2,353	67.6
	Chinese	427	12.3
	Indian	273	7.8
	Other Indigenious Groups	377	10.8
	Others	51	1.5
	Total	3,481	100.0

4	Marital Status	Frequency	Percent
	Single	849	24.4
	Married	2,583	74.2
	Single Parent	50	1.4
	Total	3,482	100.0

5	Programme	Frequency	Percent
	BBA	418	12.0
	BIM	429	12.3
	BMC	76	2.2
	BIT	675	19.4
	BITM	107	3.1
	DIM	183	5.3
	DIT	85	2.4
	BEMATH	458	13.2
	BESC	313	9.0
	BETESL	562	16.2
	BEME	62	1.8
	BECE	62	1.8
	BEEE	48	1.4
	Total	3,478	100.0

6	Semester	Frequency	Percent
	1	342	10.6
	2	390	12.1
	3	699	21.8
	4	321	10.0
	5	178	5.5
	6	583	18.1
	7	267	8.3
	8	263	8.2
	9	101	3.1
	10	63	2.0
	11	2	0.1
	12	1	0.0
	13	3	0.1
	Total	3,213	100.0

7	CGPA	Frequency	Percent
	0.00 - 1.00	30	1.0
	1.01 - 2.00	156	5.2
	2.01 - 3.00	1,658	55.1
	3.01 - 4.00	1,165	38.7
	Total	3,009	100.0

8	Funding	Frequency	Percent
	Ministry of Education	1,219	35.5
	EPF	198	5.8
	PTPTN	1,060	30.8
	Scholarship	47	1.4
	Loan	148	4.3
	Self-Funding	765	22.3
	Total	3,437	100.0

Appendix B: Profile of Respondents (contd.)

9	Learning Centres	Frequency	Percent
	Bangi	54	1.5
	Batu Pahat	88	2.5
	Durian Daun	202	5.7
	Jitra	66	1.9
	Johor	198	5.6
	Kelantan	255	7.2
	Kota Samarahan	27	0.8
	Kuala Terengganu	71	2.0
	Kuantan	197	5.6
	Likas	55	1.6
	Mentakab	111	3.1
	Minden	40	1.1
	Miri	74	2.1
	Neg Sembilan	48	1.4
	Negeri Sembilan	120	3.4
	OUM	88	2.5
	Perak	217	6.1
	Petaling Jaya	220	6.2
	Miri	74	2.1
	Sabah	96	2.7
	Pulau Pinang	174	4.9
	Sandakan	87	2.5
	Sarawak	163	4.6
	Seberang Prai	111	3.1
	Sembulan	51	1.4
	Shah Alam I	250	7.1
	Shah Alam II	114	3.2
	Sibu	161	4.5
	Tawau	57	1.6
	Terengganu	71	2.0
	Total	3,540	100.0

10	Distance between LC and Home	Frequency	Percent
	<10km	693	20.3
	10 - 30km	1,079	31.7
	31 - 50km	650	19.1
	51 - 100km	562	16.5
	>100km	423	12.4
	Total	3,407	100.0

11	Job Sector	Frequency	Percent
	Public	2,414	69.7
	Private	821	23.7
	Self-Employed	127	3.7
	Unemployed	100	2.9
	Total	3,462	100.0

12	Income	Frequency	Percent
	<RM1000	340	10.0
	RM1000 - RM2000	2,229	65.4
	RM2001 - RM3000	659	19.3
	RM3001 - RM 4000	121	3.6
	>RM4000	59	1.7
	Total	3,408	100.0