



AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE EFFECT OF LEARNING SKILLS WORKSHOP ON LEARNING READINESS IN AN ODL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Learners in higher education institutions require a set of learning skills in order to cope with their studies. This is even more crucial for ODL learners, majority of whom are working adults with multiple commitments. At Open University Malaysia (OUM), Malaysia's first ODL institution, a Learning Skills Workshop is conducted for new learners to assist them in adapting to their new learning environment and to equip them with the relevant skills to be an effective ODL learner. This paper examines the effect of the Learning Skills Workshop on the learning readiness of OUM learners. The study employs a survey approach using a set of 40 close-ended questionnaires distributed to 263 learners in four learning centers across the country. Pearson Correlation, Independent Sample t-Test and Stepwise Regression Analysis were carried out using the SPSS version 11.5 for Windows. The results showed that the workshop contents, namely, ODL Concept, Time Management, Assignment Preparation, ICT and using LMS have a positive impact on the level of learning readiness. The results also indicated that learners' level of satisfaction towards the conduct of the workshop, its perceived benefits derived from it and learners' self-confidence arising out of it have a positive influence on learning readiness. Out of the eight variables, only four explained 58 percent of the variation in the level of learning readiness. The variables are ODL concept, LMS, self-confidence and the level of satisfaction. The study thus indicates that the Learning Skills Workshop has been effective in enhancing learning readiness among new learners. This result concurs with that of another study on the efficacy of learning skills workshop on new students at OUM (Latifah & Jamaludin, 2007)

Keywords: Open And Distance Learning (Odl), Learning Skills Workshop, Learners' Level Of Readiness

INTRODUCTION

More and more working adults have opted for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a means of upgrading their paper qualifications, knowledge or skills as part of a life-long learning process. Open University Malaysia (OUM), Malaysia's first Open and Distance Learning institution, offers many interested individuals, particularly working adults, the opportunity to continue their studies. The majority (>95%) of OUM learners are working adults and as part-time learners they have to juggle with multiple commitments and schedules in order to cope well with their studies. They are distributed throughout the 63 learning centers across the country, and being distant from the main administrative centre, 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. This sense of isolation can contribute to low motivation, learning ineffectiveness, poor academic achievement, negative attitudes and overall dissatisfaction with the learning experience. 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 and self-managed learning, to mention a few.

To address the challenges that the new learners may face on entering OUM, the Centre for Student Management (CSM) introduces the Learning Skills Workshop (LSW), a program which focuses on promoting student achievement, success and persistence. The program is conducted jointly/collaboratively with the counseling unit, faculties and learning centers and is structured to provide an array of information that allows learners to make informed decisions, establish realistic goals and assess their own circumstances. Basically the workshop 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 possible. Activities conducted in the workshop include individual and small group counseling, study skill instruction, and basic coverage on myLMS (OUM's e-learning platform) and Digital Library.

This paper investigated the impact of LSW on learners' learning readiness in OUM's ODL environment. It investigated the impact of a total of eight independent variables which include five independent variables of workshop content: (i) ODL concept, (ii) Time Management, (iii) Assignment Preparation, (iv) Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and (v) Learning Management System (myLMS), and three other independent variables (vi) learners' perceived satisfaction towards the workshop, (vii) perceived benefits derived from the workshop, and (viii) self confidence arising out of the workshop, on learners' level of readiness in pursuing their studies.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of the research was to gauge the impact of the study skills workshop on the learners' level of readiness in pursuing their studies at OUM. The research examined the impact of the content of the workshop on the level of learners' readiness. The relationships between the learners' perceived benefits, satisfaction, self confidence and their level of readiness after going through the workshop were also investigated.

To guide the research, five questions have been developed as follows:

Q1: Is there any effect of the *workshop content* (ODL concepts, Time Management and Assignment Preparation, ICT and accessing and using the LMS) on ODL learner's learning readiness in pursuing their studies?

Q2: Is there any effect of ODL *learner's satisfaction* towards the conduct of the workshop on ODL learner's learning readiness in pursuing their studies?

Q3: Is there any effect of ODL learner's *perceived benefit* of the workshop on ODL learner's learning readiness in pursuing their studies?

Q4: Is there any effect of ODL learner's *self confidence* as a result of the workshop on ODL learner's learning readiness in pursuing their studies?

Q5: What factors best explain the variation in the level of ODL learner's learning readiness in pursuing their studies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Open and Distance Learning is becoming more and more popular among working adults. However, it continues to be challenging to fully engage all these learners. According to Dam (2004), different learners show different adoption rates and that older learners are more resistant to e-learning. In his research on moving from traditional learning to flexible mode of delivery, Holley (2002) noted that the change which involved replacing contact hours in a course with online interactions is not readily accepted by students.

According to Pillay, Irving and Tones (2007), many institutions that have adopted online learning pay little attention to the personal and technical skills of learners that are required of students to achieve academic achievement and satisfaction. Lotze (2002) pointed out that adult learners returning for academia after a long absence from it often experience high level of discomfort with technology. Paloff and Pratt (2001) opined that learners must be given clear guidelines otherwise they will become confused and disorganized and their learning process will suffer. According to Lynch (2001), without such training, faculty will be spending excessive time troubleshooting problems related to technology while learners experience frustration and diminished self esteem.

According to Tinto (1993), orientation programs have significant impact on the adjustment of new students to their new learning environment, culture and requirement. The mission or role of orientation programs according to Greenlaw, Amliker and Barker (1997) is to provide continuing services and assistance that will help students in their transition to new learning environment, expose them to the broad educational

opportunities of the institution and integrate them into the life of the institution. Zieger (2005) noted that there was an increased interest in the research on the impact of orientation programs on undergraduate students during 1980s, where institutions begin to see the importance of such programs on students' satisfaction and retention. Dessler (2003) opined that an ideal orientation program should be able to make students feel comfortable, understand the university's culture and environment, expectation and goals and become socialized into the system. Tinto (1993) termed these efforts as academic and social integration, which have impact on students' decision to persist in their programs. Thus, many ODL institutions introduce orientation programs to improve on their students' learning readiness in this new learning experience.

METHODOLOGY

The research instrument

The research was conducted using a structured 50-item closed-ended questionnaire divided into 3 sections. *Section One* comprises of 20 questions related to the level of understanding of the workshop content on five areas namely ODL Concept, Time Management, Assignment Preparation, ICT and using LMS. *Section Two* comprises of 20 questions on learners' level of Readiness. Response for these questions is based on five-point Likert scale with "5" indicating "Strongly Agree" and "1" for "Strongly Disagree". *Section Three* consists of 10 questions on learners' demographic, socio-economic, academic information, satisfaction on the conduct of the workshop, perceived benefit from the workshop and learners' self confidence after attending the workshop.

The Sample

The sample comprises of 263 randomly selected participants of OUM's Learning Skills Workshop conducted in four different learning centers throughout Malaysia. The questionnaire was administered towards the end of the workshop. The data collected were then analyzed using the Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11.5 for Windows.

The Variables

The dependent variable is defined as "Learner' Learning Readiness" and is measured by obtaining the mean score of *Section Two* of the questionnaire. Mean score of four and above indicates a high level of learning readiness and mean score below four indicates a low level of learning readiness.

The independent variables are categorized into two groups. The first group relates to the content of the workshop. These are ODL, Time Management, Assignment, ICT and myLMS. The second group relates to the feedback as a result of attending the workshop and the outcome of the workshop itself. These are learners' level of satisfaction on the workshop, perceived benefits of the workshop and self-confidence after attending the workshop.

The Analysis

The Cronbach's Alpha value was used to confirm the questionnaire's reliability. The Pearson Correlation was used to determine the linear association between the eight independent variables and the dependent variable. To find if there is a significant difference in the mean scores for the five independent variables between learners who score high and low in readiness, the independent samples t test was used. High score in the level of readiness is defined as the mean score obtained for readiness greater or equals to 4.0 on a scale of one to five. Finally, a stepwise regression analysis was conducted to determine which of the independent variables best explain the variation of the learners' level of readiness.

RESULTS

The Profile of Respondents

A total of 263 responses were received from participants located in four different learning centers throughout Malaysia. Of these total, 131 are males and 132 females. In terms of age group, 169 or 64.3 percent of them are within the age of 18 to 30, 59 (22.4 percent) are within the age of 31 to 40, 26 (9.9 percent) are within the age of 41 to 50 and the balance 9 (3.4 percent) are above 50. The samples also comprised of 61.6 percent Malays, 11 percent Chinese, 12.9 percent Indians and 14.4 percent other ethnic groups.

The samples also consisted of 58.6 percent who are still single, 39.9 percent married and 1.1 percent divorced. Working adults make up of 85.9 of the samples with 3.4 percent unemployed and 10.7 percent involved in business or self-employed. It was also found that 65.4 percent of the samples financed their own studies. In terms of entry qualifications, 38 percent of the samples enrolled via direct entry and 62 percent through open entry.

Cronbach's Alpha of the instrument used was 0.87 indicating that the questionnaire has a high degree of internal consistency or reliability.

Q1: Is there any effect of the workshop content (ODL concepts, Time Management and Assignment Preparation, ICT and accessing and using the LMS) on ODL learner's Readiness in pursuing their studies?

The results of the Pearson Correlation Test obtained indicated that there are strong and significant correlation between the five independent variables and the level of readiness. Thus the contents delivered in the workshop have a positive relationship with the level of learning readiness. (See table 1).

Table 1: Pearson Correlation between Workshop Content and Level of Readiness

		ODL	Time Management	Assignment	ICT	LMS
Readiness Level	Pearson Correlation	.599(**)	.497(**)	.514(**)	.476(**)	.509(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: Independent Samples T Test with Level of Readiness as the Dependent Variable

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
ODL	7.555	261	.000	.3622	.04794	.26783	.45664
Time Management	5.089	261	.000	.3180	.06248	.19493	.44101
Assignment	6.542	261	.000	.4318	.06600	.30180	.56171
ICT	5.754	206.452	.000	.3674	.06386	.24155	.49334
LMS	5.857	261	.000	.5073	.08662	.33674	.67786

The independent samples t test results in Table 2 shows that there is a significant difference between the mean score for ODL, Time Management, Assignment, ICT and LMS between samples with high and low level of readiness. Thus the workshop content (ODL, Time Management, Assignment, ICT and LMS) has an impact on learner's level of readiness.

Q2: Is there any effect of ODL learner's satisfaction towards the workshop conduct on ODL learner's Readiness in pursuing their studies?

The Pearson correlation between learners' satisfaction towards the conduct of the workshop and the level of readiness was found to be 0.480 and significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). (See table 3).

Table 3: Pearson Correlation between Workshop Satisfaction and Level of Readiness

		Workshop Satisfaction	Readiness Level
Workshop Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	1	.480(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
Readiness Level	Pearson Correlation	.480(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

The independent samples t test obtained indicated that there is a significant difference between workshop satisfaction and learner's level of readiness. (See table 4). Thus learner's satisfaction towards workshop conduct has an impact on learner's level of readiness.

Table 4: Independent Samples T Test for Workshop Satisfaction with Level of Readiness as the Dependent Variable

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Workshop Satisfaction	5.783	261	.000	.4501	.07783	.29688	.60341

Q3: Is there any effect of ODL learner's Perceived Benefit of the workshop on ODL learner's Readiness in pursuing their studies?

The Pearson correlation between learners' perceived benefit of the workshop and the level readiness was found to be 0.437 and significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). (See table 5). The independent samples t test obtained indicated that there is a significant difference for workshop satisfaction between learners with high and low level of readiness. (See table 6). Thus learner's perceived benefit towards workshop conduct has an impact on learner's level of readiness.

Table 5: Pearson Correlation between Perceived Benefits of Workshop and Level of Readiness

		Perceived Benefit	Readiness Level
Perceived Benefit	Pearson Correlation	1	.437(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
Readiness Level	Pearson Correlation	.437(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6: Independent Samples T Test for Perceived Benefit with Level of Readiness as the Dependent Variable

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Perceived Benefit	5.220	253.455	.000	.4034	.07728	.25117	.55555

Q4: Is there any effect of ODL learner's Self Confidence as a result of the workshop conduct on ODL learner's Readiness in pursuing their studies?

The Pearson correlation between learners' self-confidence as a result of the workshop and the level of readiness was found to be 0.625 and significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). (See table 7) The independent samples t test obtained as shown in Table 8 indicates that there is a significant difference for self confidence as a result of the workshop between learners with high level of readiness and low level of readiness.

Q5: What factors best explain the variation in the level of ODL learner's readiness in pursuing their studies?

The R^2 value obtained from the regression analysis was 0.58. Out of the eight variables, only four; ODL concept, LMS, self-confidence arising out of the workshop and the level of satisfaction of the conduct of the workshop, explained the 58 percent variation in the level of readiness.

Table 7: Pearson Correlation between Self Confidence towards the Workshop and Level of Readiness

		Self Confidence	Readiness Level
Self Confidence	Pearson Correlation	1	.625(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
Readiness Level	Pearson Correlation	.625(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 8: Independent Samples T Test for Self Confidence with Level of Readiness as the Dependent Variable

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Self Confidence	9.122	261	.000	.5491	.06019	.43056	.66761

CONCLUSION

The results of the study showed that the learning skills workshop, both in terms of contents and outcome of attending the workshop, has a positive impact on learner's learning readiness. The mean score of the five independent variables; ODL concept, Time Management, Assignment Preparation, ICT skills, and LMS have strong correlation with the learners' level of learning readiness. The independent samples t test showed that there is a significant difference in the mean score for these five independent variables between learners who score high and low on learning readiness. The findings of this empirical study also pointed out that learners' satisfaction, self confidence and perceived benefits after attending the workshop have positive impact on their learning readiness.

These research findings are important as it will help ODL institutions in addressing retention of ODL learners at an early stage. The findings concurred with the research findings carried out by Latifah and Jamaludin (2007) and Muilenberg and Berge (2005).

According to Latifah and Jamaludin (2007), participants of the workshop show positive impact after attending the workshop where the percentage of these learners sitting for exam and re-registering for the following semester is higher than those who did not attend the workshop. According to Muilenberg and Berge (2005), learners who displayed highest level of comfort and confidence in using online learning technologies have perceived significant fewer barriers in social interactions and motivation for studies. Out

of the seven causes of learners' departure from college as discovered by Tinto (1997) in his research, six are related to the degree in which learners connect and assimilate into the university.

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