Online Learning in Open and Distance Education: Learners' Perceptions from the Diploma in Early Childhood and Primary Education Program in Sri Lanka

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Abstract
This study examined the perceptions of Diploma in Early Childhood and Primary Education (DECPE) students toward the future introduction of online learning in their program at Sri Lanka. A survey research design was employed using questionnaires and interviews to collect data from 100 randomly selected students from the 2014/2015 batch. The findings showed that most students viewed online learning positively, identifying benefits such as time-saving, flexibility to learn from home, instant feedback, and improvement in English language skills. However, students also highlighted several barriers, including limited face-to-face interaction with lecturers, lack of computer and internet access, financial constraints, low computer literacy, and insufficient English proficiency. The study concluded that students have a clear understanding of both the benefits and challenges of online learning. It recommends that the university provide adequate training, technological support, blended learning opportunities, and financial assistance to facilitate effective implementation of online learning in the future.

Keywords: Online Learning, Open and Distance Education, Learners' Perceptions, Educational Technology

1. Introduction

In the last sixty years, information and communication technology (ICT) has progressed greatly, and has influenced the everyday life of people. As a result of that people have become technologically dependent. In that sense, many flexible learning education providers have adopted information and communication technologies for their programmes. So, this adoption has led to new modes of education called E- learning, online learning, M-learning and Network learning (Georgiev, Georgieva, & Smrikarov, 2006). National Report of online learning (2006) stated that *"Online learning may include any organized instruction using internet technologies in conjunction with face-to-face instruction or in place of it*". Barbour,et, al. (2004) defines online learning as*: "Education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily via the internet and online learning is a form of distance learning".*

As mentioned by Matthews (1999) implementation of electronic tools in relationship with flexible learning activities creates a lot of opportunities and is convenient for students. Students are able to follow the course without considering any geographical boundaries and flexible/ distance learning becomes real time learning where students can obtain the course materials and the instructions from the teacher straight away without any delay. Students can actively get communication facilities such as chat room; discussion board and email etc and make them feel like they are learning with a group of people.

As a result of this technological evolution, wide introduction of online technologies to support teaching and learning has significantly altered the practice of teaching in many tertiary institutions (Abrioux, 2004). The traditional higher education classroom has increasingly moved from a face-to-face environment to one that is integrated, blended or even replaced by online interaction (Lockyer & Bennett, 2006). Further it provides many opportunities for students and in particular can enable them to become self-directed, independent learners and eventually lifelong learners.

As online enrollments continue to rise, research in this area will remain an important area of study (Alexander, Truell and Zhao, 2012). As stated by Dobbs, Waid, & Carmen (2009) research identifying students' perceptions of online learning is limited. Although many post-secondary instructors are involved in designing online courses, as indicated by Beard, Harper, and Riley (2004) many of these offerings are designed without needed student contributions. In addition, research involving student perceptions of online courses has typically concentrated on students who have had experience with online courses (Dobbs,

Waid, & Carmen, 2009). According to the study of Rodriguez & Ooms (2008) on Students' Perceptions of Online-learning (students with no online-related learning experience) students convince was strongly related to motivation to learn technology skills. Moreover, perceived quality and satisfaction with online courses is an important factor in explaining perceived quality of such courses. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the perceptions of students in Diploma in Early Childhood and Primary Education Programme (DECPE) (who have had no experience with online courses) in relation to their perception of taking online courses in future.

Background to the Study

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) has become a pioneer tertiary institute which provide open and distance learning opportunities to Sri Lankan people to success their lifelong learning objectives. At present OUSL offers several online courses as supplementary courses or blended courses with the aim of expanding the online learning opportunities for students in future. The DECPE Programme is one of the leading programmes in the Faculty of Education which provides professional development opportunities for preschool and primary school teachers. So far only one course of the DECPE Programme (ESD1230 Child Development I) has been designed for online learning.

To promote online learning among students while maintaining the quality of online learning programmes, it is important to investigate about learner's perception on this learning pattern. Because learner group is one of the main sector who gains the benefit of any learning opportunities. Further studying about learner's perception will lead to identify ways and means to improve the quality of online learning for current online programmes as well as future implementation. (Bernard et, al. 2004). The University takes continuous measures to promote online learning. Therefore, it is high time to conduct an investigation on learners' perception on online learning in DECPE Programme.

1.1 Objectives of the study

1. To identify student's perception on online learning.
2. To find out advantages and disadvantages they would receive when learning through online
3. To identify student's suggestions to overcome perceived disadvantages when learning through online

1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to achieve the above objectives.

1. How do students perceive on online learning?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages students would perceive when learn through online?
3. What suggestions students would perceive to overcome the perceived disadvantages when learning through online?

1.3 Literature review

Students' Perception on Online Learning

Student perception is an influential factor in the successful adoption of educational technology (Lui A. K. Choy Sheung-On, Cheung Y. H.Y. & LI S. C., 2006). O'Malley and McCraw (1999) suggested perceived effectiveness of a technology such as online learning is contributed by three factors: the prior educational condition, characteristics of students, and perceived characteristics of the technology.

The Study conducted by Dobbs, Waid, & Carmen (2009) revealed that students perceived that traditional face-to-face courses were easier than online courses. In addition, students who have had never taken any online courses had totally different perceptions about online education compared to students who have had taken online courses. Students who have had never experienced online education perceived that faculty have low expectations, while students who have had experienced online courses believed that faculty has high expectations. With reference to Craig, Goold, Coldwell, and Mustard (2008) on Perceptions of Roles and Responsibilities in Online Learning stated that students also have a positive attitude towards the use of ICT to support teaching and learning. Nevertheless it mentioned that students are generally unprepared for new learning experiences. Further, Students consider the use of ICT as a supplement to traditional teaching only and are concerned about the loss of quality of their learning experience as well as the apparent transfer of burdens and costs to them. Mortagy and Boghikianon (2010) mentioned that to enhance the future success of students and their satisfaction with online courses as well as perceptions of quality, educators would do well to help to prepare students for the technological demands of the course either through prerequisites or direct training. Motivation to engage and learn technological tools could easily be included as a prerequisite.

According to the study of Kavaliauskienė &Valūnas (2012) since e-learning has become requirement in higher education, the blended learning is highly recommended as it is acceptable to many students. Blended learning (also called hybrid learning) allows students to receive significant portions of instruction through both face-to-face and online means. Researchers see blended learning in the middle of the spectrum between fully face-to-face and fully online instruction (Graham, Allen, and Ure 2005; U.S. Department of Education 2007; Watson et al. 2010).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Learning

The study conducted by Alexander, Truell, Zhao (2012) on online learning identified, convenience factors of not having to pay attention to dress, worry about how to get to class (car issues), or dealing with bad weather were rated as the main advantages of taking courses online. In addition, flexibility was also rated highly, as the expectation of being able to work on the course at your own time and pace was seen as quite desirable. Another advantage perceived by a large number of students was not having to sit through lectures and being able to view/review lectures as needed. Another major advantage of online courses was to deal with other students disrupting class and not having to deal with other students asking questions.

The main disadvantages of taking online courses were perceived as the likelihood of procrastinating, not understanding content when not face-to-face with the instructor and more self-discipline needed for reading and learning. Misunderstanding assignment directions, trying to contact the instructor for help and technological issues were all reported as potentially frustrating and stressful disadvantages of online learning. In addition, many students indicated that using the computer for other non-related course activities, such as Face book, while working on the course would be a drawback (Alexander, Truell, Zhao, 2012). Smart & Cappel (2006) also highlighted some challenges perceived by students. Among them, content-related issue (inclusion of models in the learning units) and not having enough “new” information or were not interesting were main challenges.

A study done by Burton & Goldsmith (2002) on students’ experiences in online course, have stated that the most significant personal challenge to online courses recognized by students was not the challenge of course content, but the need for discipline in managing the work equipments of their online courses while balancing the demands of carriers and personal commitments.

2. Research Methodology

As the study focuses on identifying the learner's perception on online learning in open distance mode a survey research design was adopted with both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

2.1 Population

The population of this study was around 900 students, registered for the Diploma in Early Childhood and Primary Education Programme in four regional centers ; Colombo, Kandy, Matara and Anuradhapura of the Open University of Sri Lanka in the academic year of 2014/2015.

2.2 Sample

The sample of this study was composed of 70 Sinhala medium students and 30 English medium students from four regional centers who have registered for the DECPE level 3. The sample size of each regional center was based on stratified random sampling method.

2.3 Data collection instruments

A questionnaire was used as the major data collection instrument. Twenty questions were included in to the questionnaire according to the objectives. Questionnaire was distributed to students to gather primary data. Further semi structured interview schedule was employed with 20% of the sample to gather data in-depth.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data of the study was analyzed by using simple statistical methods such as tables and charts. Qualitative data of the study was descriptively discussed.

3. Discussion

According to the basic characteristics of the sample, majority were in ages between 20-30 years. 78% of the sample was not employed as teachers in primary or preschools. Nearly 84% of the respondents were aware of online learning previously. In addition, nearly half of the respondents were aware of the opportunities available for online learning at The Open University of Sri Lanka. It was revealed that 51% respondents were aware of the opportunities directly from the OUSL while 16% were aware through friends. It was further identified at the interview that majority had an idea on online learning by participating in programmes such as inaugurations, day schools and through university website. According to the data gathered by four regional centre and medium wise, there were no significant

differences of given responses. Thus, the data were analyzed irrespective of centre wise and medium.

3.1 Student's perception on Online Learning

According to The National American Council for Online Learning (NACOL), online learning is defined as Education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily via the Internet. National Report of online learning (2006) also states online learning may include any organized instruction using Internet technologies in conjunction with face-to-face instruction or in place of it.

The Table 1 shows the students perception on online learning.

Table 1: Students Perception on online learning

Responses	**No. of Responses %**
Without participating day schools learn through websites and internet	63
Learning through internet facilities	21
Not respondents	16

According to the above Table 1 majority perceived online learning as learning through internet without participating face to face contact sessions. 16% of the sample didn't respond for this question. Following statements of respondents further revealed their perception on online learning.

"Without participating day schools learn through websites and discussing details lively"

"It is an opportunity to develop our knowledge connecting with internet (Modern technology)"

"It is a way to learn through internet and computers without going to the classroom physically, assignments can be submitted through online too"

"We can participate for the lectures from anywhere"

"Can learn through internet while staying at home"

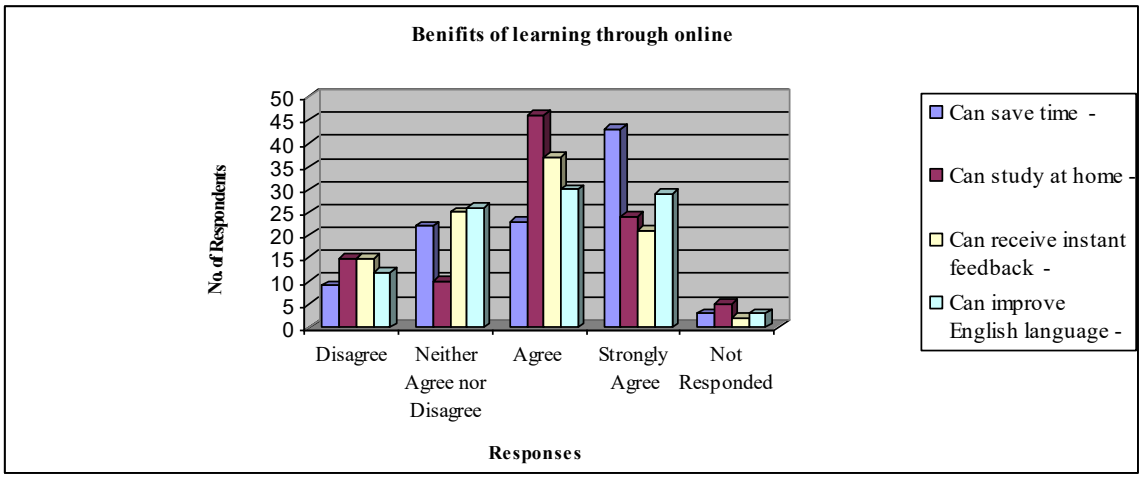
"It is a one way of learning through internet, but it is unsuccessful system"

Based on the data gathered from the questionnaire and interview it could be revealed that in this study majority clearly perceived that in online learning they learn through internet, which indicates that majority have strong perception on online learning.

In addition, it was identified that though 90% of the respondents weren't involved in any online programmes offered by the OUSL or any other institute which provide online learning facilities, 81% of the respondents were interested in following the programmes through online in future.

Following Chart 1 indicates the responses given by the majority of respondents with regard to the benefits which can be obtained by learning through online.

Chart 1: Benefits of Learning through online



As indicated in the above Chart: 1, majority (46% agree and 24% strongly agree) perceives the facility to study at home as the most important benefit they can obtain through online learning. In addition, they perceive, saving time, opportunities to improve English Language and receiving instant feedback for their work as further benefits that they can obtain respectively through online learning. When the students were questioned on this regard at the interview they further mentioned that facility to study at home is most important as they do not need to come to class room and they can work at any time. As Alexander, Truell, Zhao (2012) identified, also in this study majority of the respondents considered convenience factors of; not having to worry about how to get to class; flexibility and being able to work on the course at their own time and pace as the main benefits they can obtain through online learning.

3.2 Problems students might face when learning through Online

The following Table 2 indicates the data identified through questionnaire and interview on the problems students would face when learning through online.

Table 2: Problems students might face when learning through Online

Main concerned Problems identified by the respondents	**No. of Respondents%**
Lack of face to face contact with lecturer regarding further clarification	31
Difficulty to obtain computer and internet facility due to high cost	18
Lack of computer literacy to work online	08
Lack of English knowledge to work	14
Lack of knowledge to learn via online	14
Difficulty to manage time at home due to household work	03
Power cut, slow internet	05
Not Responded	07

As shown in the above Table 2, it could be revealed that the main concern of students would be the lack of face to face contact with the lecturer regarding further clarification. In addition, majority of sample also concern about the high cost they have to spend on computer and especially for internet. Further lack of knowledge on online learning and English language to work online also could be identified as their concerns. Apart from those major concerns, they have few slight concerns on failure of power, slow internet and difficulty of managing time with household work at home. The following statements of the sample at the interview further illustrate their concerns on the same.

"I don't know much about this method"

"It is not face to face learning, so can't clear the doubts and difficulties"

"Can't take internet facility continuously"

"Sometimes power cuts are there and difficulty to find internet facility everywhere"

"Difficulty to get on the spot solutions for questions"

"Need to improve knowledge on technology"

"Difficulty to obtain extra-curricular knowledge and practical knowledge on day to day living"

"When discuss with the lecturer in face to face session, we can establish what we learn easily. But it is limited in online learning"

"It is very difficult to continue online learning with my job. Because difficult to concentrate."

The above statements further illustrate that majority of them were concerned on difficulty to meet lecturers due to lack of face to face contact sessions in online learning and difficulty to obtain internet facility due to its cost. Some of the above problems, such as trying to contact the instructor for help, and technological issues have been reported as potentially frustrating and stressful disadvantages of online learning (Alexander, Truell, Zhao, 2012).

3.3 Suggestions made by the respondents to overcome the difficulties that they would have when learning via online

The majority (60%) of respondent stated that it would be better if they will be offered with blended online course rather than fully online courses. They further reported this might help them to contact lecturers during day schools and solve their problems. More over following statements demonstrate respondents' suggestions to overcome the problems related to online learning.

"Best way is blended learning: let students to learn online while participating face to face sessions"

"Introduce low cost internet packages for students to facilitate their learning through online"

"Provide more opportunities for students to develop English knowledge"

Eg: English course/ English supplementary course/English for ICT

"Aware students more about how to learn through online effectively"

"It is better if we can have loan facilities from university to buy computers and internet facilities"

According to the above data, it was revealed following suggestions made by the majority of the sample as remedies for their concerns if they will be offered online learning in the DECPE Programme in future.

- Developing proper awareness, knowledge and skills to engage in online learning as well as English knowledge by taking necessary steps by the University
- Blending on and off face to face contact sessions parallel with online learning
- Introducing reasonable loan schemes to bear the cost of computer and internet facilities by the university

4. Conclusion

The findings of the study concluded that majority of respondents have strong favorable perceptions on online learning and its advantages and disadvantages. Most of them were in favor of learning through online. As Craig, Goold, Coldwell, and Mustard (2008) mentioned, they have a positive attitude towards the use of ICT to support teaching and learning. However, they also have strong concerns on shifting from traditional face to face contact sessions to fully online sessions and cost of technology which they have to bear individually. Further, lack of knowledge of English language and technology also could be identified as de-motivating factors for online learning. This further concludes that students convince was strongly related to motivation to learn technology skills. Moreover, perceived quality and satisfaction with online courses is an important factor in explaining perceived quality of such courses (Rodriguez & Ooms; 2008). Nevertheless, students also were aware of remedies for their identified issues in online learning. These conclusions suggest the Department of ECPE to take up measures to implement online learning by introducing a proper mechanism to minimize the difficulties identified by the students when learning via online to provide quality learning. Thus, the study recommends initiating with blended online learning (Kavaliauskienė & Valūnas, 2012) as it allows students to receive significant portions of instruction through both face-to-face and online means.

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