PROBLEMS OF OUSL CENTRE NETWORK IN 2007 AND 2017

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Abstract:

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is highly concerned about the student satisfaction. One major reason for the concern is that dissatisfaction leads to dropping out of students. Undoubtedly, high rates of dropouts mean high wastage of resources. Therefore, these institutions are concerned about student satisfaction and a common approach to ensure satisfaction is to provide Student Support Services (SSS). The expectation of the institutions is to increase student satisfaction so that success rates would increase. A strategy adopted by the OUSL similar to many other Open Universities is to operate a network of centers in order to facilitate the provision of SSS. At the same time, the centers themselves face problems in the provision of SSS and these in turn can affect student satisfaction. The main aim of this study is to compare the problems faced by the OUSL network of centres in the provision of SSS in 2007 and 2017. The study also aimed to identify the SSS currently provided by the OUSL network of centres, the current problems faced by them in the provision of SSS and to make suggestions to minimize the problems. In 2007, there existed only 4 regional centres and 17 study centres in the centre network while now the number of regional centres has gone up to 8 and the number of study centres has increased up to 27. The instruments used to collect data were a questionnaire and an interview schedule. The analysis of data was done qualitatively. The findings revealed that although some of the problems that existed 10 years ago were solved some still existed may be to a lesser degree. Additionally a few fresh problems currently faced by the centres of the OUSL centre network were also identified. Suggestions were given to minimize the problems.

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Keywords: comparing problems 2007 and 2017, Open University of Sri Lanka, student satisfaction, regional and study centres, student support services, suggestions

1. Introduction

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was established in 1980 under the University Act No 16 of 1978 as the only national University for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Sri Lanka. The university has by now completed more than 35 years of existence and at present caters to a student population of around 45000 by offering more than 60 programmes of study, ranging from foundation and certificate programmes to post graduate degree programmes.

A problem which affected the OUSL from its inception was the alarming rate of dropouts from the study programmes. This was due to the fact that students who were used to the conventional education system being unable to adapt to ODL which involves self-learning to a great extent. Therefore the OUSL similar to most other Open Universities around the world take great efforts to provide student support services (SSS), to the student population of the University. In ODL, one barrier, the students face is the barrier of distance

A major strategy employed by the OUSL to overcome the barrier of distance is to take the study programmes to the door step of students dispersed in all parts of the country to the extent possible. For that purpose, a network of centres has been established in various regions of the country. Currently The OUSL has 35 main centers in operation to provide support services to the students. The centres are mainly of two types. They are the regional centres (8 in number) and the study centres (27 in number). The two types of centres differ from each other according to the number of study programmes conducted, the facilities available and the size of the student population. In regional centres most of the study programmes run by the OUSL are conducted, many facilities including laboratories are available and have bigger student populations generally exceeding 1000 students when compared with the study centres. However, in the process of providing various support services to the students the centers also face problems. The problems faced by the centers may again in turn affect students. Therefore, in 2007, that was 10 years ago, the present researcher investigated the problems faced by the centers of the OUSL among other things. Now after 10 years it was felt appropriate to find the current situation as well as to see whether there are fresh problems in relation to the provision of SSS. This paper deals with the situation of the problems of the OUSL network then and now.

2. Literature Review

The literature review conducted for the study done in 2007 and suitably revised to match the objectives of the present study is presented in the following sections under three sub headings. The sub headings are student support services, problems faced by students due to weaknesses in the provision of SSS and Problems faced by centres in the provision of SSS

2.1 Student Support Services

Comacho 1996 in a study of barriers to completion of a distance education programme recommended support for all students to prevent dropout. Holmberg 1995 stated that all institutions make all kind of efforts to support students in order to prevent dropout. It is actually seen that many open universities and other open and distance educational institutions provide student support services (SSS) to their students. UNESCO 1990 stated that most distance education systems provide support for students. According to Raghunath 1994, a mechanism adopted by most open universities and other distance educational institutions to facilitate the provision of SSS was to operate centres. For example, Mirja & Singh 2014 stated that to provide effective and efficient student support service, IGNOU has set up a number of study centers all over the country. Several researchers have focused their attention on the centres of open universities and other distance educational institutions. The studies of Gupta 2000 and Tait 2000 have shed more light on various aspects of study and regional centres such as importance, needs, role and functions.

2.2 Problems faced by students due to weaknesses in the provision of SSS

Researchers such as Gupta 2000, and Sharma 2001 also investigated the problems faced by students due to the weaknesses in the provision of SSS. Their findings were similar to those stated above while some other problems were also highlighted by them. In the OUSL context, Jayathissa 1999 and Lekamge et al 1999 conducted research in this area and identified some problems, which students face. One of the main findings of both studies was the failure to provide course materials on time. All these problems faced by students in obtaining support in turn can affect their satisfaction.

2.3 Problems faced by Centres in the provision of SSS

Holmberg 1995 emphasized the importance of student satisfaction. Various other researchers also focused their attention on student satisfaction. In research literature, some factors identified as affecting student satisfaction were institutional factors. The

ODL institutions themselves cause these factors and the students have no control over them.

Problems faced by the centres in the provision of SSS have been identified as institutional factors which affect student satisfaction. Lockwood and Gooly 2001 among others studied about the problems faced by the centres. However, there seems to be a gap in the research literature as no worthwhile studies were found on the effect of the problems faced by centres on student satisfaction.

3. Materials and Methods

The research design of the study was the longitudinal design and was conducted as a sample survey. The analysis was done qualitatively.

3.1 Research Objectives
The objectives formulated for the current study are stated below:
1. Identify the SSS currently provided by the centres of the OUSL.
2. Compare the problems faced in 2007 and 2017 by the centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS
3. Identify the fresh problems currently faced by the centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS
4. Make suggestions to minimize the current problems faced by the centre network of the OUSL in the provision of SSS.

3.2 The population and the sample
In this study, the population was the regional and study centres of the OUSL centre network. All centres of the OUSL form the population of the study. In 2007 there existed only 4 Regional centres and gradually 4 more centres that existed as study centres were updated to the states of Regional centres increasing the number of regional centres to 8. In 2007, there were only 17 study centres and during the last 10 years, the network further expanded with the establishment of 10 more study centres. Therefore, the currunt number of study centres stands at 27. For the purpose of this study, 4 regional centres and 6 study centres were selected using the stratified random sampling technique by drawing numbers. The 4 Regional Centres thus selected were Anuradapura, Batticaloa, Kandy and Kurunagala centres. While the 6 study centres selected were the Ampara, Bandarawela, the population and the sample is presented in table No 1 below.

Table No 1: The population and the sample of centres of the OUSL centre network

Centre type	Population size	Sample size	Items in the sample
Regional centres	8	4	Anuradapura, Batticaloa, Kandy, Kurunagala
Study centres	27	6	Ampara, Bandarawela, Gampaha, Killinochchi, Puttlam, Rathnapura

3.3 Data collection instruments and procedures

The instruments used to collect data for the study consisted of a questionnaires and a semi structured interview schedule. The questionnaire used in the 2007 study was suitably modified for the objectives of the present study. The questionnaire was e-mailed to the Assistant Directors (ADs) in charge of the centres selected for the sample along with the problems identified in the 2007 study in table form. Telephone Interviews using the semi-structured interview schedule were conducted with the ADs to obtain more information and clarifications on the information already received through e mail.

4. Results and Discussion

A.   Objective No 1: Identify the SSS currently provided by the centres of the OUSL centre network

4.1 Study centres

Issuing of course materials, conducting day schools, other face-to-face sessions and computer practical sessions, library facilities, counseling, assignments, CA tests and examinations, few facilities for group study, providing information, providing some welfare facilities, issuing and receiving applications, registration and re-registration of students, student bursaries.

4.2 Regional centres

While providing all the SSS mentioned under the study centres, at a much larger scale, the regional centres conduct science and engineering practicals, academic counselling, as well as conducting training workshops and sessions for external resource persons.

B.   Objective No 2: Compare the problems faced in 2007 and 2017 by the centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS

The data related to the comparison of problems faced by the centres of the OUSL at the two points of time are presented in table No 2 below.

Table 2: Comparison of the problems faced between 2007 and 2017 by the OUSL Centres

Support Service Component	Problems faced by the centres in 2007 (the problems that existed 10 years ago)	Current situation of problems faced by the Centres in 2017
Issue of Course Materials	RC & SC • not received in time, • not in adequate quantities, • errors in books, • more books than needed, • no course materials, • students obtaining year round, • no stock maintenance.	RC • errors in course materials, • not updated. SC • sending more or less number of books than needed, • students obtaining year round, errors in books, not received in time, course material not revised.
Practical Sessions	RC & SC • poor lab conditions, • equipment not enough, • old equipment, • problems of repairing equipment, • no training to staff, • outdated computer courses, frequent power failures, • high Internet bills.	RC - Nil SC • old equipment, • outdated computer courses, • frequent power failures, • poor laboratory (computer) conditions (no a/c, no proper furniture), • equipment not enough, • problems of repairing faulty equipment.
Library Facilities	RC & SC • not enough books, • no new publications, • no periodicals, • lack of AV materials, • lack of staff, • no photo copy machine, • not lending, lack of seating, • no staff table, • no proper facilities, • AV cassettes destroyed by fungus, irregularity of course materials coming.	RC - (some) Nil Some Rcs: • libraries are not satisfactory at all. SC • no new publications, • no periodicals, • lack of seating, • no library available, • no photo copy machine given, • no proper facilities, • no proper library, no lending, • no space for a library, library books stored in cupboards which are decaying (request for new cupboards rejected)
Assignments	RC & SC • submission dates not sent, • marking schemes not in	RC • no uniform instructions (the matters related to assignments mostly specific

	time, • errors in assignments, • delay in marking, • no uniform instructions, • late submissions.	to faculties), • no uniform instructions, • late submissions by students. SC • submission dates not sent, • delay in marking, • marking schemes not received in time (some submission dates not received at all. e.g.- engineering).
Selection tests, CA tests & final examinations	RC & SC • several at the same time, • eligibility lists delayed, • timetables delayed, • revision test marking schemes delayed, • not enough question papers, question paper packets coming without informing.	RC • several at the same time, • timetables delayed, • delays in releasing exam is a serious issue and this affect the entire system • old exam management system • several at the same time (faculty of engineering), • not receiving enough question papers (sometimes). SC • question paper packets coming without informing, • eligibility lists delayed, • timetables delayed, • revision test marking schemes of English courses delayed in coming.
Counselling	RC & SC • difficulty to contact, • nobody responsible, • no coordination between sections, • inadequate academic staff, • wrong counseling at registration, • negative attitudes, • weekend weekday system error.	RC very frequent problems that are specific to faculties: • Nobody responsible, • Inadequate academic staff. SC • difficulty to contact academics in the main campus, • nobody responsible, • no coordination between sections in the main campus, • inadequate academic staff, • wrong counseling at registration, negative attitudes, • weekend (centres) weekday (main campus) system error

Group Study facilities	RC & SC • no classrooms, • weekend's problems, • misuse, • carelessness.	RC – Nil SC • no classrooms, • not in a position to allocate our classrooms during weekends due to congestion.

Welfare Facilities	RC & SC
	• poor quality canteen, no canteen,
	• no place for students to eat,
	• no sports facilities,
	• no hostels,
	• inadequate furniture in hostels.
		RC
		• no adequate furniture in hostels
		• no welfare at all:
		  o canteen,
		  o no place for student to eat,
		  o no hostels.
		
		SC
		• no canteen,
		• in some centres:
		  o no place for students to eat,
		  o no such welfare facilities,
		  o no common room for students.

Receiving Programme information	RC & SC • not receiving, • delay in receiving, • getting information over the phone difficult, • irregular receiving, • bad departments, • weaknesses of providing.	RC • generally ok, but some departments are not cooperating, • delay in receiving. SC • getting information over the phone from the main campus difficult, • not receiving, delay in receiving, • .irregularity in receiving, • bad departments, • weaknesses in providing information to students.
Any Other?	RC & SC Nil	RC - nil SC - nil

Key: RC = Regional centre, SC = Study centre

The interviews conducted through the telephone with the Assistant Directors of the centres generated more information related to various support services which are presented below.

Issue of course materials: Regarding the issue of course materials some ADs agreed that it has improved a lot. According to them different mechanisms have been

adopted, since recently to boost the dispatch activities and also Stock maintenance was done in a proper way now

Thanks to the developed Management Information system, everything is sent through E mail which is speedy and reliable (e.g. assignment marking schemes). All instructions and notices are also sent similarly. For repairing faulty equipment such as computers, different procedures are adopted although they are not always productive.

The comparison of the problems that existed in 2007 and now at present in 2017 reveal that in the provision of many support services, problems still exist. The reasons for this state of affairs may be due to the increased complexity of the University. During these 10 years the student population has almost doubled, the number of courses and programmes conducted and the number of centres has very significantly increased. However, as per the information collected from the interviews, it was revealed that over the years the University has developed its structures and procedures in order to solve the problems to the extent possible. Another fact identified was the differences between the centres in the problems faced by them. Of course, with regional centres having more resources than study centres the problems they face was found to be less than those of study centres. However, it came to light that even within the same type of centres the resource availability was different among centres and therefore the problems the centres face were also different. However, as per the information collected from the interviews, it was revealed that over the years the OUSL has developed its structures and procedures in order to solve the problems to the extent possible although not becoming successful all the time.

C.   Objective No 3: Identify the fresh problems currently faced by the centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS

The data collected for objective No 3 is presented in the table No 3 below.

Table 3: The fresh problems faced by OUSL centres in the provision of SSS

Support Service Component	Fresh problems/issues faced by OUSL centres at present in the provision of SSS
Issue of Course Materials	RC • Issuing outdated course materials without updating them by some departments for some courses. SC • Course materials for some courses which are not conducted at the centre are sent. Storing them is a problem as cupboards and spaces are limited. • Lack of facilities to keep course materials in good condition. • No procedure to remove outdated unused course materials.

Practical Sessions	• Unable to start computer based short course due to outdated computers • All the computer courses conducted are outdated and such • Certificates are not recognized by the government. • There are infrastructure problems also. • Outdated Operating Systems, Software & Computers.

Library Facilities	RC & SC
	• There is a scarcity of journals and other periodicals (especially for the academic staff), who patronizes this library, though occasionally.
	• Delay to receive new publications and periodicals.
	• No proper mechanism to remove outdated books.
	    o Not enough books
	    o Lack of seating
	    o Not enough space

Assignments	RC & SC No new issues
Selection tests, CA tests & final examinations	RC • A few problems in online applying process for examinations. • Require annual training for examination staff regarding examination procedure. • Examination system should modernized to handle with internet system. • Students are unnecessary paid due to delay of exam results. SC • Takes a long time to release selection test results. • Therefore, student admissions are delayed. • Change of exam time tables. • Delays in informing the final exam schedules. • In a short notice, it is difficult to do the necessary arrangements (requesting advances for external staff, reservation of exam halls etc.). • Rescheduled dates of postponed exams not informed in time (we get the news from the students!)
Counselling	RC - Nil SC • Even though contact numbers of central campus academics are given; no one answer the phone calls. • AD face many difficulties when there is no academic counselor responding to queries from the centre or from the students.
Group study facilities	RC Nil for some centres, but some centres face space problems, no study huts for study purposes.

	SC • No free classrooms available during weekends, • No facilities in the premises.
Welfare facilities	RC • Insufficient and poor condition of TRF Facilities. • No space to provide such facilities to students SC • Only minimal facilities available.
Receiving Programme information	RC - Nil SC • Difficult to get common leaflets about programmes to the centre. • No way to inform the changes to students. Can use only telephone calls
Any Other? **Promotional** **Physical facilities** **Visiting lecturers**	RC • National level promotion is not enough. • No concern about the national level schedules such as GCE AL & OL examination results releasing periods when issuing applications for the academic programmes. SC • The lack of the awareness about the University and its programmes, • Poor Condition of the buildings , classrooms not enough, furniture old and uncomfortable, • Rathnapura: No adequate numbers of class rooms. Furniture, old and uncomfortable. • Most of the schools now refuse to grant exam hall facilities/ class rooms due to various reasons. Either we have to hire from other outside places (they have higher rates!) or centres should be given spacious exam halls • Not enough multimedia projectors, • Not/Late receiving of items which are requested through Procurement Plan. • Delay in issuing Visiting Lecturers' appointment letters. • Even though issued sometimes earlier, the centre copies of such appointments are not received in time and cause payment delays to visiting lecturers.

Key: RC = Regional centre, SC = Study centre, TRF = Temporary Residential facility

The table No 2 present the data collected for the objective No 3 regarding the fresh problems /issues faced by the Regional Centres in the provision of SSS. It is a matter for concern to find that the centres face fresh problems in the provision of SSS.

4. Recommendations

Suggestions to solve problems faced by the centres of the OUSL centre network were also provided by the ADs during the telephone interviews conducted. The recommendations based on those suggestions are presented below.

1. Align application issuing periods for programmes of study as appropriate with the national examination results releasing periods.
2. Link course material revision with the performance appraisals of academics
3. To regularly conduct surveys about problems/issues faced by the centres in the provision of SSS and take action to solve them without delay..
4. Revise and upgrade computer certificate courses conducted by the centres so that those certificates can obtain state and private sector recognition.

5. Conclusions

The regional centres of the OUSL should provide more SSS than the study centres and also at a larger scale.

A.   Study centres

Issuing of course materials, conducting day schools, other face-to-face sessions and computer practical sessions, library facilities, counseling, assignments, CA tests and examinations, few facilities for group study, providing information, providing some welfare facilities, issuing and receiving applications, registration and re-registration of students, student bursaries.

B.   Regional centres

While providing all the SSS mentioned under the study centres, at a much larger scale, the regional centres conduct science and engineering practicals, academic counselling, as well as conducting training workshops and sessions for external resource persons.

Many problems that existed in 2007 faced by the centres of the OUSL in the provision of SSS still exist. The study centres face more problems than regional centres in the provision of SSS.

There are some new problems faced by the centres of the OUSL. The OUSL has been making efforts to minimize the problems as early as possible.

About the author

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