Student Satisfaction in an Online Programme at the UWI Open Campus
A Survey of Final Year Students in the B.Sc. Management Studies Option

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Abstract

The issue of quality in higher education and in open and distance education in particular, is becoming increasingly prevalent. This prevalence has been influenced by historical and economic developments worldwide which have impacted on the perspectives of administrators and academics in higher education. On the one hand there has been a movement in many universities toward greater profitability and consequently more focus on 'the bottom line". On the other hand there have also been calls for qualitative change through a 'transformation" of the participants in education (Harvey, 1997). Transformation involves fostering collegiality. Higher education is a collegial process but collegiality must be balanced with accountability. Critical to this accountability according to Harvey, 1996 is student feedback. The perspective of students must be taken into account and to do this Harvey (1996) suggests the use of student satisfaction surveys. This paper presents the findings of a student satisfaction survey conducted with final year students registered in the B.SC. Management Studies degree programme offered by the UWI Open campus for the 2008/9 academic year. The results of the survey are analysed with regard to their implications for quality assurance in Open and Distance Learning.

Key words: Student satisfaction, student feedback, quality assurance, open and distance learning, online learning

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Council of the University of the West Indies approved the development of an Open Campus of the University. This decision marked the implementation of an integral aspect of The UWI's 2007-2012 Strategic Plan. The UWI Open Campus (UWIOC), which was born out of several former outreach units of UWI including the UWI Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC), the Tertiary Level Institutions Unit, the School of Continuing Studies, the Caribbean Child Development Centre, the Hugh Lawson Shearer Trade Union Education Institute, the Human Resources Development Unit, the Social Welfare Training Centre and the Women and Development Unit, was established in August 2008 to cater to the tertiary education needs of the people of the region.

In 2004, concerns were expressed by one former Director of the UWIDEC about the fact that within the Office of the Board of Undergraduate Studies and the Office of the Board of Graduate Studies, there was no provision made for quality assurance for courses and programmes offered by distance. Although plans are in place now for such a provision in the Open Campus, the current situation is a

source for concern as the UWI Open Campus has a mandate to increase programmes and courses offered by three-fold within a 5-year period. Moreover, changes to structures and operations at UWIOC have led to staff frustration as some level of uncertainty, typical of a rapidly changing organization, has accompanied the birth of the UWIOC. The organization is therefore ever conscious of the need to focus on quality assurance, as we seek to effectively meet the needs of students and other stakeholders. This paper reports on a survey conducted with final year students of the UWIOC, registered for a B.Sc. Degree in Management Studies, one of the flagship programmes of the former UWIDEC. The survey is intended to provide feedback on the levels of student satisfaction with various operational areas of the UWI Open Campus and to analyse the implications of the results for quality assurance in the UWIOC.

I start by outlining the structure and operations of the UWIOC and then briefly discuss the concept of quality in the context of the UWI and the UWIOC and the importance of student feedback in quality assurance.

BACKGROUND: STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS OF THE UWIOC

The UWIOC is headed by a Principal and governed by a Campus Council in keeping with the statues and ordinances of the UWI. The UWIOC draws on the existing intellectual capacity of the three older campuses and its organizational structure is driven by operational functions of teaching, research and consultancy. The academic operations of the UWIOC are governed by an Academic Board, which is subject to the authority of the Board for Undergraduate Studies (BUS) and the Board for Graduate Studies and Research. Teaching and learning is facilitated online and at 42 Open Campus Centres located in 16 English-Speaking countries throughout the region.

Staff members of the Open Campus are distributed across the Caribbean and in order to carry out its functions, UWIOC is organized into the following offices and departments:

1. Student services
2. Academic Programming and Delivery
3. Consortium for Social Development and Research
4. External Relations and Inter-Institutional Collaboration (ERIIC)
5. Information Technology and Technical Services
6. Library and Information Services
7. Office of Finance and Administration
8. Office of the Deputy Principal
9. Office of the Principal
10. Open Campus Country Sites

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Peterson (1999) credits the emergence of quality assurance in higher education to the expansion of higher education worldwide. Likewise, Gaither (1998) makes the point that the global environment within which we operate is driving the push for quality assurance systems. Countries are becoming increasingly competitive economically and have been trying to train larger populations of their society in order to compete in today's technological market. Governments investing in higher education are demanding value for money and a more discerning public is also placing quality high on the agenda.

Bogue(1998) identifies three types of quality assurance adopted by higher education institutions. These are traditional peer review evaluations, which involve accreditation by other agencies, rankings and ratings such as those used in the United States and programme reviews. Secondly, there is the assessment and outcomes approach which focuses on results such as those emanating from student evaluations and programme evaluations. Finally, there is the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach where students are seen as consumers.

Quality Assurance at UWI

In keeping with world trends in the 1990s, the UWI sought to enhance their generic pattern of quality assurance by implementing a system of quality audit and assurance. The Board of Undergraduate Studies (BUS) was established in 1996 to carry out this function.

The definition of quality by BUS is “Fitness for Purpose”. Miller (2002) points out “ Quality is then judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purposes. This allows decisions as to the aims and objectives of the teaching of a discipline, the content of programmes and courses, teaching methods, assessment practices etc. to reside with the teaching staff, while an evaluation of the results may be performed by others.” (Miller, 2002, p.4)

The main elements of the quality assurance system are:

1. A university organizations structure designed to support the work of the departments and faculties
2. The publication of Mission Statements, Aims and objectives, 5 year strategic plans and operational plans at the campus and faculty levels
3. A charter of Principles and responsibilities (Student Charter) outlining what a student at UWI should expect of the university
4. A system of student information and support
5. A system for vetting and reviewing requirements or matriculation, programmes and courses, examinations, examiners, awarding qualifications
6. A system for quality assurance reviews and audit, including the appraisal of academic staff, obtaining stakeholder feedback,
7. A quality assurance review process including self assessment and quality audits.

Details of this system are described in the *UWI Quality Strategy:The Quality Assurance System at the University of the West Indies* (Office of the Board of Undergraduate Studies, 2000).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The British Quality Assurance Agency and several universities in Britain have emphasized the importance of student feedback in the quality assurance process (Williams, 2002). The student is recognized as “consumer” and principal stakeholder in the higher education system. As a result, feedback from the student and action on this feedback is being given primary importance in maintaining high standards (Williams, 2002; Harvey, 2000). This recognition of the importance of student perceptions has resulted in the development of the student satisfaction approach by Harvey (2000). The student satisfaction approach requires a process of ongoing exploration and analysis of student views on their learning experience, and the establishment of a procedure to ensure that concerns are addressed.

In the absence of a formal student satisfaction survey administered by the UWIOC, this study was designed to provide final year students registered in one programme of the UWI Open Campus with the opportunity to provide feedback on their experiences. I will present a summary of the views of these students across the region, which can be used to inform the plans for quality assurance at the UWI Open Campus.

METHODOLOGY

The survey design was used for this study, with data collected via an online questionnaire. The survey design was selected because of the large size of the target population. According to Open Campus records, there are 764 students registered in the final year of the B.Sc. Management Studies Programme for the 2008/9 academic year. The total number of students registered in all programmes in UWIOC for the 2008/9 academic year was 4,333 and of this amount, 2,596 were registered for the B.Sc. management studies programme. This particular degree option was selected of its high enrolment and the large number of courses offered online.

The questionnaire used to collect the data was based on Harvey's student satisfaction approach and a pilot survey developed by the University of London's Institute of Education (2005). The questionnaire contained five sections, with a total of 46 closed and 4 open-ended questions. The sections were Demographic Information; Information about the Programme; Overall Course Experience; Registry Services; and Student Support. A copy of the questionnaire is attached at Appendix 1.

In each section, students were asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction with services and/or resources provided by the UWIOC using the following scale:
Very Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, No Opinion, Satisfied, Very Satisfied.

A link to the online survey was e-mailed to the 764 final year students registered in the programme, which has a total registration of 2,596 students. The link was included in a message inviting them to participate in the survey. The survey was available between March 20,2009 and April 30, 2009, with reminders being sent via e-mail to those who did not complete after the first and third weeks.

RESULTS

The survey had a response rate of 27%, with 211 students from 21 sites completing the questionnaire. 82% were females and 18% males. The highest percentage of students (31%) was between the ages of 26 and 32.

1. Obtaining Information About Your Programme

This section dealt with twelve issues related to obtaining information, including the relevance of information in the student handbook, availability of registration information, accessibility of general information about courses and programmes, availability of examination information and availability of information on orientation courses and student support programmes.

There was a high level of satisfaction (75%) with the relevance of information in the student handbook, and with the accessibility of general information about courses and programmes online on the open campus website (65%).

The highest level of dissatisfaction expressed (22%) was with regard to the availability of information on orientation courses and student support programmes. There were also relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with the availability of examination results (15%) and availability of registration information (13%).

When asked to comment on their experience in obtaining information on courses, several comments related to the lack of information at some Open Campus Sites and the inability of some staff members to address information concerns. The view was expressed that there were positive developments with regard to availability of information but there needed to be more communication with students.

Several students expressed the view that information on registration, examinations and courses, including course material was always late and this was a source of frustration

2. Overall Course Experience

In this section students were asked to express their levels of satisfaction with the quality of printed course materials, the timeliness of delivery of course material, the availability of additional learning resources, the clarity and ease of navigation of the course websites,the content of the courses,the overall quality of websites, accessibility and responsiveness of course coordinators and etutors,responsiveness of the academic support team, timely feedback on assessments and opportunities to provide feedback on the courses.

The highest levels of satisfaction were expressed with regard to the overall quality of the course websites (66%), the content of the course (64)%, the clarity and ease of navigation of the course websites (63%) and the quality of the printed course material (54%).

High levels of dissatisfaction were expressed with the timeliness of delivery of course material , where 24% of the students were very dissatisfied and 33% were dissatisfied. 35% of the students were dissatisfied with the availability of additional learning resources. There were mixed reactions towards course coordinators and etutors as 29% of the students were dissatisfied with the responsiveness of the course coordinators, while 44% were satisfied and similarly 28% were dissatisfied with the responsiveness of etutors, while 48% were satisfied.

Students' comments on the overall course experience focused on the disparity between some etutors who were excellent and others who were described as lazy, giving little feedback and generating little or no discussion. There were also opinions expressed about the challenge of doing quantitative courses online. It was also felt that the volume of work for part-time students was very high. Students did not feel they had enough opportunity to provide feedback.

3. Registry Services

While students expressed high levels of satisfaction with the helpfulness of open campus staff with registration (61%), areas of dissatisfaction included timely availability of mid-semester grades, timely availability of examination results, timeliness of responses to examination queries and cost of the programme. Tables 1-4 in Appendix 2 refer.

4. Student Support

Students expressed satisfaction with the helpfulness of staff at the centers but were dissatisfied with the study facilities and the limited face-to-face tutorials, with 56% of the students being very dissatisfied with the limited tutorials and 23% being dissatisfied. The other area of dissatisfaction was with regard to library facilities at the center. See Tables 5 and 6 in Appendix 2.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With regard to availability of information it is apparent that while students are satisfied with the relevance and accessibility of specific types of information there are gaps in the sharing of information particularly by site staff. This gap suggests that there is need for some level of training in student services for site staff as well as enhanced internal communication to ensure that staff members are informed.

Another area which needs to be addressed is that of timeliness of information in particular with regard to registration, examination and course information. There is a need for earlier planning and perhaps re-direction of resources when required to ensure deadlines are met.

With regard to overall course satisfaction, the main areas requiring attention are the responsiveness of course coordinators and tutors and the need for access to library facilities. Students' comments about lack of interaction by some etuors and their requests for additional face-to-face tutorials suggest there may be need for more orientation to independent learning on the part of the student. On a theoretical

level, the philosophy that should drive our response to this comment by the students is that of constructivism. Students need to develop an “interactive relationship between experiences, ideas and existing constructs” (Crebbin, 1999, p.14). Under this model students need to become active learners. There is a need to promote what Biggs (1999) calls a deep approach to learning. At UWIOC we must foster openness of the online environment to the promotion of active learning. To do this it is necessary to have the support of tutors and course coordinators who can be encouraged to use innovative techniques to promote active learning.

There may be a need for enhanced training for course coordinators and etutors in facilitating online learning. Enhanced systems of recruitment of etutors must be developed or greater use must be made of existing etutors who have proven themselves effective and who are available to facilitate more than one group of students.

Kirkpatrick (2005) points out that a framework for quality assurance in open and distance learning should address:

- a general philosophy which includes the policy and mission statement, culture, attitudes of staff and staff commitment.
- Products- Learning materials, course resources, media, outputs (retention rates etc, number of graduates assessment outcomes, pass rates standards of performance.
- Services- registration and advisory services, tutoring counseling, feedback and guidance on learning, support for learner progress, provision and management of study centres and resources, customer service, ICT helpdesks, responsiveness to issues
- Support processes- delivery systems, record keeping, scheduling, electronic backup, whare housing and stock control, QA procedures.

The UWIOC needs to examine the relevance and applicability of Kirkpatrick’s (2005) framework to our situation. The results of this survey emphasize the need to address quality in all areas of our operations, but in particular, the areas of teaching and learning, evaluation and assessment and student support must be given priority as gaps have been identified by the students.

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APPENDIX 1

STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

Welcome to the student satisfaction survey. I am grateful to you for taking the time to complete it. Please indicate your level of satisfaction with various aspects of the UWI Open Campus's provision to help us improve the quality of service in the future.
The rating scale is 1-5. 1=very dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=no opinion, 4=satisfied and 5=very satisfied. Please note that the survey is anonymous and confidential.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. At which Open Campus Site are you registered? (please tick one)
    - o Antigua
    - o Anguilla
    - o Bahamas
    - o Barbados
    - o Belize
    - o British Virgin Islands
    - o Brown's Town
    - o Cave Hill
    - o Cayman Islands
    - o Denbigh
    - o Dominica
    - o Grenada
    - o Ocho Rios
    - o Mandeville
    - o Mayaro
    - o Mona
    - o Montserrat
    - o Morant Bay
    - o Montego Bay
    - o Port Antonio
    - o Sangre Grande
    - o San Fernando
    - o Sav La Mar
    - o St Augustine
    - o St. Kitts/Nevis
    - o St. Lucia,
    - o St. Vincent
    - o Tobago,
    - o Turks and Caicos Islands
    - o Vere

2. Are you male or female?
    - o Male
    - o Female

3. Within which age-range do you fall?
    - o 18-25
    - o 26-32
    - o 33-39
    - o 40-46
    - o 47-53
    - o 54-61
    - o 62 and over

4. How long have you been registered for a degree at the Open Campus?
    - o Under 3 years
    - o 3-5 years
    - o 6-8 years
    - o More than 8 years

OBTAINING INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR PROGRAMME

In considering your experience of obtaining information about your courses and programme of study, indicate your level of satisfaction with:

1. The relevance of the information in the Student Handbook
2. Accessibility of general information about your courses and programmes on the Open Campus website
3. Availability of registration information at the Open Campus site
4. Availability of examination information
5. Availability of information on orientation courses and student support programmes
6. Additional comments

OVERALL COURSE EXPERIENCE

How satisfied are you with:

1. The quality of the printed course materials
2. The timeliness of delivery of course material
3. The availability of additional learning resources e.g. online journals, books or reference materials
4. The clarity and ease of navigation of the course websites
5. The content of the courses
6. Overall quality of the course websites
7. Accessibility of Course Coordinators for students
8. The responsiveness of Course Coordinators
9. Responsiveness of the academic support team
10. The quality of the support by eTutors
11. The responsiveness of etutors
12. Timely feedback on in-course assessments
13. Opportunities to evaluate your courses and provide feedback to course coordinators
14. Additional Comments

REGISTRY SERVICES

How would you rate your level of satisfaction with:

1. Helpfulness of Open Campus Staff with the registration process
2. Speed of responses to registration queries
3. Timely availability of mid-semester grades
4. Timely availability of examination results
5. Speed of responses to examination queries
6. Cost of the programme
7. Additional comments

STUDENT SUPPORT

How would you rate your level of satisfaction with:

1. General Site Orientation programmes for students
2. Student Support Programmes such as the Improving your Math Skills, Improving your Reading Skills and Improving your Study Skills
3. Study facilities at your Open Campus Centre
4. Access to computers at your Centre
5. Quality of teleconference facilities
6. Amount of face to face tutorials

7. Facilities for face-to-face tutorials
8. Technical support at the Open campus Centre
9. Library Facilities at your Centre
10. Opening hours at your Centre
11. Helpfulness of Staff at the Centre
12. Competence of Staff at the Centre
13. Overall quality of resources and service at the Centres
14. Availability of relevant software at the Centres e.g. minitab,
15. Timeliness of online helpdesk responses to queries
16. Quality of online helpdesk assistance with technical problems
17. Overall Usefulness of the Open Campus website
18. Overall quality of the Open Campus website
19. Additional comments

Appendix 2

Table 1

26. Timeliness of responses to registration queries		
Very Dissatisfied	6	3%
Dissatisfied	45	21%
No Opinion	30	14%
Satisfied	108	51%
Very Satisfied	22	10%
Total	211	100%

Table 2

27. Timely availability of mid-semester grades		
Very Dissatisfied	23	11%
Dissatisfied	82	39%
No Opinion	25	12%
Satisfied	77	37%
Very Satisfied	3	1%
Total	210	100%

Table 3

28. Timely availability of examination results		
Very Dissatisfied	35	17%
Dissatisfied	86	41%
No Opinion	21	10%
Satisfied	64	31%
Very Satisfied	2	1%
Total	208	100%

Table 4

30. Cost of the programme		
Very Dissatisfied	63	30%
Dissatisfied	45	22%
No Opinion	32	15%
Satisfied	48	23%
Very Satisfied	21	10%
Total	209	100%

Table 5

38. Facilities for face-to-face tutorials		
Very Dissatisfied	60	29%
Dissatisfied	51	24%
No Opinion	29	14%
Satisfied	62	30%
Very Satisfied	7	3%
Total	209	100%

Table 6

37. Limited face-to-face tutorials		
Very Dissatisfied	116	56%
Dissatisfied	48	23%
No Opinion	20	10%
Satisfied	21	10%
Very Satisfied	2	1%
Total	207	100%