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Perceptions of Distance Learner towards Students Support Services at Higher Education in West Bengal

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Abstract

Student support services are the main pillars of education for the distance learner as the whole process of learning and the academic outcomes are solely dependent on the qualities of services offered. The present study aims to assess perceptions of the learner towards the student support services provided at higher education in West Bengal. The survey carried out among students of Rabindra Bharati University and Kalyani University show that there is mass discontentment. Few students are satisfied with the quality and amount of SSS provided by the two leading universities. Dissatisfaction is found across the sample but the impact is more among the male respondents, the respondents who are married and the respondents residing in rural areas.

Keywords: SSS, ODL, distance learning, students' perception, interaction

Introduction

Student support services (SSS) in higher education are devised to assist the learner in his quest for knowledge. These include printed materials, videos, audios, teleconferencing or any other form of communication which enables transfer of knowledge and enhances learning quality. The cluster of facilities and activities are intended to make learning interesting and easy for the learner. In the absence of regular interaction between the learner and his institution, these facilities serve as an interface. In case of distance learning, the student support services are the only means to provide growth and development of academic experience of the student. The quality of education in case of distance learning is thus directly dependent on the student support services.

In case of distance education, there is very little physical connection between the student and the institution and the emotional and social connection is build up through the SSS. An efficient and effective SSS ensures more success among students, lower dropout, positive feedback from the learners, greater number of enrollments, more active student participation and more satisfaction among the stakeholders. The watchdogs of higher education have issued mandatory strictures for every institution which have to be followed by all affiliated units. Almost every sphere of teaching learning activities have been broadly covered through the regulations but autonomy of the institution still remains. Every affiliated institution devises different set of rules and guidelines within the broader framework to suit their local needs. The student support services provided to the learner in higher education is thus different from one university to the other and they are framed within the limitations of the institutions considering the guidelines.

Student support services are the main pillars of education for the distance learner as the whole process of learning and the outcomes are solely dependent on the qualities of services offered. Most students are not familiar with the mode of teaching when they first enroll for ODL programs and the quality of SSS plays a pivotal role in retaining them in the course. Ciobanu (2013) opines that without adequate support services, the students are more likely to give up their studies as they do not have adequate academic, social or emotional connection with their institutions. Cognitive, affective and systemic support are essential for enhancing students' motivation, self commitment, self esteem and self efficacy of distance learners (Arifin, 2018) and they play a pivotal role in enhancing students' persistence. Seward (1993)

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felt that the management of student support services must satisfy the needs of the students which are expressed by themselves or through intermediaries. Failure to take note of the growing dissatisfaction might lead to complete collapse of the system. Dillon et al (1992) felt that perceptions of the students must be assessed from time to time to understand the real cause of dissatisfaction among learners and the pitfalls must be plugged without any delay. Under this backdrop, the present study aims to assess perceptions of the learner towards the student support services provided at higher education in West Bengal through a survey conducted on a representative sample collected from two leading universities offering courses on distance mode.

Objectives of the study:
In view of the basic research questions and delimitations of the study; the following objectives are established:
i.   To find out the perceptions of respondents towards students support services of distance learner in higher education of West Bengal.
ii. To find out the differences in perception of University's students towards student support services in Distance Learning with regard to their gender, habitat and marital status.

Hypothesis:
The hypotheses for the present study are as follow:
H₀1: There is no significant difference in perception towards students support services of distance learner in higher education on the basis of their Gender.
H₀2: There is no significant difference in perception towards students support services of distance learner in higher education on the basis of their habitat.

H₀3: There is no significant difference in perception towards students support services of distance learner in higher education on the basis of their marital status.

Methodology:
The present study is a cross sectional survey conducted among the students at higher education level in ODL mode using of Perception Scale on Student Support Services in ODL Institution, obtaining necessary permission from the heads of respective institutions. The survey was conducted in two different universities (Rabindra Bharati University and Kalyani University) in two different districts, namely, North 24 Parganas and Nadia of West Bengal.

Delimitation:
The study was delimited to the following –
i.   The data were collected form students of Kalyani University and Rabindra Bharati University.
ii. The independent variables of the study were confined to demographic variables like gender, habitat and marital status; and the dependent variable was perception towards student support services in distance learning.
iii. The sample (N=120) group of students were studying in postgraduate level for Distance Learning in West Bengal.

Sample:
The study sample consisted of a total number of 120 (60 male and 60 female) students at higher education level studying in post-graduate level and belonging in the age group of 20 to 27 years. The purposive sample technique was used for the study. The details of age and gender wise distribution of the students under study are given in table 1:

Table 1: Age and Gender wise sample distribution.

		Age of the students								Total
		20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
Gender	Male	3	6	3	3	16	18	8	3	60
	Female	2	11	3	3	14	17	6	4	60
Total		5	17	6	6	30	35	14	7	120

Information about the research tool for data collection:
The tool consisted of 36 items having 34 positive and 2 negative items along with a four point Likert Scale of 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree', 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree' carrying a weight age of 34 for positive items and just 2 items reverse in case of negative items. Each item was scored on a 4 point Likert type scale having the following connotations: 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Agree), 4 (Strongly agree) for 34 positive items and another 2 items were followed the revised score.

Statistical Analysis:
Raw data of 120 students in ODL mode gathered were individually tabulated in excel sheet. Data was analyzed using statistical package for social science (SPSS Package)

version 20.0.
Result:
This study was conducted on a total number of 120 students at higher education level in ODL mode; out of which 60 were male and 60 were female in the age group of 20 to 27 years of two different districts in West Bengal. Out of total number of students (120), 80 (66.67%) students showed negative perception score and 40 students i.e. 33.33% showed positive perception score in Perception Scale on Student Support Services in ODL Institution. The rate of prevalence of perception towards Students Support Service of distance learner in higher education on the basis of gender, habitat and marital status is shown in table 2:

Table 2: rate of prevalence of perception towards Students Support Service of distance learner (in percentage).

Level	Gender		Habitat		Marital Status	
	Male	Female	Rural	Urban	Married	Un-Married
Negative Perception	83.33%	50.00%	82.97%	56.16%	68.42%	66.33%
Positive Perception	16.33%	50.00%	17.02%	43.83%	31.57%	33.66%

From the above table, the perception of male students it has been observed that, 83.33% out of the male students showed negative perception whereas 50% female students showed negative perception towards SSS. It indicates that most of the male students showed negative perception towards SSS.

Among the total number of students who lives in rural area, 82.97% showed negative perception towards SSS of Higher education in ODL mode but 56.16% urban areas students were showed negative perception.

On the basis of marital status variable, it has been shown that 68.42% of students' perception towards student support services was slightly more negative than the students (66.33%) who have not married yet.

Hypothesis Testing:
The following hypothesizes (H_01-H_03) are tested –

Table 3: Hypothesizes testing (H_01-H_03).

	Variable	Gender	Habitat	Marital Status
SSS	Df	1	1	1
	χ^2	15.000	9.251	0.031
	Level of sig.	0.000	0.001	0.86
	Remarks	S (P<0.01)	S (P<0.01)	NS (P>0.05)

Testing of H_01:
It has been observed from the above chi-squire table that calculated value of χ^2 is greater than the critical values of χ^2 at the both level. So the null hypothesis cannot be accepted. Therefore, there is a significant difference between male and female students at higher education level are observed in perception towards SSS.

Testing of H_02:
It has been observed from the above chi-squire table that the calculated value of χ^2 is greater than the critical values of χ^2 at the both level. So the null hypothesis can be rejected. Therefore, there is a significant difference between students of rural and urban areas at higher education level in perception towards SSS.

Testing of H_03:
It has been observed from the above chi-squire table that the calculated value of χ^2 is smaller than the critical values of χ^2. So the null hypothesis can be accepted. Therefore, there is no significant difference between married and un-married students at higher education level in their perception towards SSS.

Conclusion:
Student support services are the pillars of distance education and the success or failure of the process depends on the quality of these services. The survey carried out among students of Rabindra Bharati University and Kalyani University show that there is mass discontentment. Few students are satisfied with the quality and amount of SSS provided by the two leading universities of West Bengal. Dissatisfaction is found across the sample but the impact is more among the male respondents as compared to the female respondents. The married respondents similarly are more dissatisfied with the SSS as compared to their unmarried counterparts. The rural students are more dissatisfied with SSS as compared with the urban students. One primary reason as found by the researchers for this issue is due to the fact that the study modules are being published in English only and not in local vernacular language. The students also are not contended with the limited personal contact program offered by the universities. Lack of adequate communication with the teachers become burdensome for the students and often they have to rely on intermediaries or private tutors for fulfillment of their educational goals.

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