Attitudes towards Student Support System in Distance Learning: A Questionnaire Survey

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate factors affecting learners' satisfaction with the student support system. 37 sophomores (at University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran) out of 44, who were selected through convenience sampling method, participated in this study. A mixed approach was adopted and data was collected using a researcher-made questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings indicated that several issues should be in focus while planning the distance learning courses, such as: reducing the sense of isolation, holding a number of workshops, allocating financial aids, providing learners with video and audio tools, and facilitating the interaction between the instructor and the learners. It was concluded that identifying mismatches between the expectation of distance learners and what has been provided by student support system might facilitate the level of learner satisfaction. Also, identifying the gaps showed several specific areas where developments in the distance learning course could be made.

Keywords: distance learner; the needs and expectations; EFL learners

1. Introduction

The interest in distance learning (DL) has increased since the last decades. It seems that one of the major reasons is the development of technologies. In this form of education, students experience network-based learning environment. The contact between the tutor and the students is provided through the media. Keegan (1995) defined DL as a "type of education resulted from the technological separation of student and teacher which frees the learners from attending to a fixed class, at a regular time, to meet a particular and fixed tutor" (p.7). Similarly, Kaufman, Watkins, and Guerra (2001) stated that distance education (DE) refers to the delivery of effective learning opportunities at suitable time and place for learners. Keegan (1990) identified five factors of DE. These factors are categorized as the influence of an educational organization, the separation of tutor and student, the provision of two-way dialogue and communication, the likelihood of meetings for socialization, didactic, and use of media. Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (2003) identified four characteristics for DE.[1] These characteristics are classified as provision of two-

[1] See Working Group in Distance Education and Open Learning (2003).Technological infrastructure and use of ICT in education in Africa: An overview by Butcher Neil. This overview of existing

way communication, institutional accreditation, possibility of face-to-face meetings (e.g. for tutorials, leaner-learner interaction, laboratory, or practice session), and use of media.

The fact is that use of media is fundamental in DE in order to ensure asynchronous and synchronous communication (Huang, 2000). Asynchronous communication occurs outside of real time. In asynchronous online courses, students use online discussion and review course materials independently (Allen & Seaman, 2011).[2] Issues of asynchronous education also consist of "learners' motivation and feedback, perceptions of isolation, instructional design, and timely communication" (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney, Wallet, Fiset, & Huang, 2004, p. 382). Synchronous communication takes place in real time when all peers and instructors must be present at the same time, however they may not be present at the same physical place. It seems that synchronous communication plays the role of a thinking device and promotes learners' creative abilities (Huang, 2000). It is likely to say that both asynchronous and synchronous approaches can be used to facilitate learning in DE. These forms of education which indicate the guidance of tutorial organization over the students' learning give direction to the importance of student support system.

In recent years, many scholars have focused on the student support system (e.g. Simpson, 2000). Tait (2000) stated three functions for the support services. These functions are divided into:

- affective: providing an environment which creates commitment, supports students, and promotes self-esteem;
- cognitive: developing and supporting learning through the learning resources for individual students, the mediation of the standard, and uniform elements of course materials; and
- systematic: establishing administrative processes and organizing information management systems (IMS) which are transparent and effective.

In addition of aforementioned functions, service providers are faced with several challenges related to the internal and external dimensions (e.g. mood of delivery, motivation, costs). Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, Glessner, Green, and Lara-Alecio (2009) stated that "the most appropriate method of instructional delivery to learners, does not mean the newest and most expensive technology tools; there are many criteria to

technological infrastructure and use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in education seeks to explore how ICT can provide support to distance education and open learning in Africa.

[2]See Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States (2011) is the ninth annual report on the state of online learning in U.S. higher education. The survey is designed, administered and analyzed by the Babson Survey Research Group. Data collection is conducted in partnership with the College Board. This study is aimed at answering fundamental questions about the nature and extent of online education.

consider, such as types of interaction, learner autonomy, access, and cost of the media" (p. 228). In other words, it can be claimed that the success of DL courses depends on a number of factors that best meet learners' needs. Most often universities and colleges attempt to choose the best technologies to deliver the DL courses. Shearer (2003) stated that technology (e.g. media) should be selected by "how it permits or does not permit the other factors of the course to behave in a system framework in which all the factors interact" (p. 275). Since behaving properly in a unified system seems fundamental in DE, Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, et al (2009) provided an instance of all essential factors that should be taken into account in such frameworks. These elements are divided into the following categories:

- faculty: expertise, philosophy, available technology, time;
- learners: attitudes, technology, time, fiscal resources, benefit to accrue, work life, barriers, support (family and institutional);
- profession: accreditation, certification, national guidelines, organizational support;
- purchaser: student, parents, third party, institution;
- university: culture, support services (admission, financial aid, career counseling); and
- technology: CMS (MOODEL, blackboard, Sakai, etc.), podcasting, streaming video and audio, DVD, CD-ROM.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Historical Background

The history of DE includes three generations, which are correspondence study, multimedia DE, and computer-mediated DE. In the 20th century, "correspondence study was developing at the private schools and universities providing instruction to vocationally-oriented, higher education, secondary, and elementary learners" (Willis, 1994, p. 9). Hamilton (1990) stated that the beginning of correspondence study depended on the emergence of the factors that contributed to the adult literacy, the printing press, a publishing industry, and low cost pens. According to Spencer (1995), this mode of education can be delivered, relying upon postal service and printed materials, to the remote areas where many learners work.

The second generation tried to integrate the use of printed materials with computers (Nipper, 1989). The main shortcoming of multimedia DE was contributed to the learners' communication. In addition, Nipper (1989) believed that the learner-learner communication was marginal. With the growth of computer technology, fostering a better condition for communicative actions was emerged. Garrison (1997) stated that computer conferencing as a form of two-way technology supported distance learners to construct meaning collaboratively. The main objective of the third generation was

concerned with social control. Menzies (1994) argued that learners and instructors were more likely to be controlled than to be served by computer technology.

2.2. Empirical Studies

Learners' satisfaction in DE has been investigated by a number of researchers (e.g. Hilgenberg & Tolone, 2000). Chen (1997) found the instructor-learner dialogue as an important element involved in DL courses. It seems that one of the biggest problems of DL programs is the limitation of communication between tutor and students, and also limitation of dialogue amongst students themselves. One strategy to counterweight the absence of communication and dialogue in DL is to institute adequate student support system. In fact, this system is an important criterion in the provision of DL.

Recently, the student support system has received great interest. For instance; Simpson (2000) and Tait (2000) examined the issue of support system in DE. Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992; cited in Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994, p. 57) identified some characteristics of student support system. They stated that access to the library resources and materials is a very essential factor. In another study, Lewis (1995) found the instructor as the main source of support in DL courses.

Furthermore, literature review showed that three services appeared frequently in the studies. These services consisted of permission to use library materials, timely learner feedback, and on-site support. The response of instructor and "turn-around time" for grading and comments were also stated as two essential criteria of student support system (Delbecq & Scates, 1989). Additionally, the support provided by on-site facilitators was consistently cited in the literature as a crucial factor to the usefulness of a DL program (Threlkeld, 1992; Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994, Murphy & Yum, 1998).

2.3. Student Attitude

A study conducted on the distance learners at Indiana University revealed that 75% of the respondents were highly satisfied with the instruction and 90% of them were satisfied with the technology support services (Fergusin & Wijekumar, 2000). In another study, distance learners were asked to express their attitudes toward the distance education. They reported that they needed to have more guidance and counselors' help (Teaster & Blieszner, 1999). In addition, another survey result showed that distance leaners were very satisfied with the course and instructors; however, they felt that direct interaction with the instructors played no effective role in their satisfaction (Inman & Kerwin, 1999).

2.4. Purpose of the Study

Although a number of studies have been carried out to evaluate distance learners satisfaction regarding DL environment and student support system, no research has already investigated the gaps between the needs and expectations of distance learners studying at University of Guilan, and what has been provided to them. It seems that there are some problems that should be resolved. These problems consist of timely feedback, easy access to the video and audio tools, financial support, etc. It is likely to say that each of these issues has an important effect on the quality of DL courses. Walcott (1994; cited in Carter, 2001) stated that "to bridge the gaps between distance education and classroom, service providers should look at the DL courses from the learners' point of view" (pg. 249). Since the purpose of this study is to evaluate factors affecting learners' satisfaction with the student support system, the needs and expectations of sophomores is investigated through a researcher-made questionnaire. Hence the present study tried to answer the following question: Does the student support system meet the needs and expectations of distance learners?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The present study was carried out using a mixed research method with survey design.

3.2. Participants

The research sample included 37 College students (sophomores) enrolled on DL courses at University of Guilan (Rasht, Iran). They were selected based on convenience sampling method.

3.3. Data Collection

Over the course of the study, two surveys were distributed at different points in time. The first survey was distributed in October, measuring learners' satisfaction with student support system and their expectations toward the DL course. The second survey was distributed in June, measuring the same variables. There was a possibility that learners' attitudes might be changed over time. That is why two surveys were distributed in October and June, respectively. It is worth noting that the second time coincided with the students' final exams. Thus, the questionnaire was designed as short as possible. However, adequate sentences and questions required for the purpose of this study were included.

3.4. Instruments

A researcher-made questionnaire is used as the main tool because it gets a good deal of learners' attitudes toward the student support system. In order to achieve a better understanding of the clarity of items, a pilot study was conducted with fifteen students enrolled on the same course. As a result of this stage, two items were revised. The reliability was calculated via Cronbach Alpha (r = 0.75). Furthermore, the face and content validity was checked through the viewpoints of two experts in this field (PhD University professors).

The first part of the questionnaire included 10 items using a five-point Likert scale (i.e., strongly agree, agree, no idea, disagree, and strongly disagree). The survey (see Appendix, Part A) was designed to elicit learners' attitudes toward timely feedback, teachers' counseling, access to the video and audio tools, access to the library materials, length of time given to complete assignments, appropriateness of assignments, and the extent of support provided by a number of departments (e.g. department of financial, admission, and placement services). The second part of the questionnaire (see Appendix, Part B) included 2 open-ended questions allowing learners to express their attitudes on DL course. They were asked which aspects of their needs and expectations were neglected or overlooked, and which aspects of the student support system must be improved.

3.5. Procedure

The questionnaire was sent via email to 44 sophomores. The importance of questionnaire and the value of participants' cooperation were highly emphasized. Respondents were asked to return it within two weeks. Out of 44, 37 returned them during the requested time. Thus, the response rate was estimated to be 84% in this study.

3.6. Data Analysis

The questionnaire was analysed using the quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Expository responses indicated by similar ideas and perceptions in the survey were categorized. That is, the learners' responses were grouped under two general headings namely "technical and academic expectations" and "humanistic expectations" (see Table 6). In addition, qualitative data was looked at through personal interpretation. This technique helped the researcher find out the extent to which the distance learners found the student support system satisfactory and supportive.

4. Results

4.1. Learner Ranking

Tables 1-5 show the findings of our research.

Table 1 Learners' Responses to Item 1-10 of the Questionnaire (October survey)

Item number	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I1	-	20	2	15	-
I2	-	18	-	19	-
I3	-	20	-	17	-
I4	-	19	1	17	-
I5	-	30	-	7	-
I6	-	31	2	4	-
I7	-	32	2	3	-
I8	-	17	5	15	-
I9	-	17	2	18	-
I10	-	29	4	4	-

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Main Variables (October survey)

Variables	N	Mean	Std.Deviation
timely feedback	37	2.86	0.97
access to the teachers' counseling	37	3.02	1.01
access to the videos	37	2.91	1.01
access to the audio tools	37	2.94	0.99
library materials	37	2.37	0.79
length of time given to complete assignments	37	2.27	0.65
appropriateness of assignments	37	2.21	0.53
financial support	37	2.94	0.94
admission support	37	3.02	0.98

placement support	37	2.32	0.66

Table 3 Learners' Responses to Item 1-10 of the Questionnaire (June survey)

Item number	Strongly agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I1	-	18	2	17	-
I2	-	17	-	20	-
I3	-	18	-	17	2
I4	-	18	-	17	2
I5	-	34	2	1	-
I6	1	35	-	1	-
I7	-	35	1	1	-
I8	-	16	3	16	2
I9	-	17	1	19	-
I10	-	29	6	2	-

Table 4 Statistics for Main Variables (June survey)

Variables	N	Mean	Std.Deviation
timely feedback	37	2.97	0.98
access to the teachers' counseling	37	3.08	1.01
access to the videos	37	3.08	1.08
access to the audio tools	37	3.08	1.08
library materials	37	2.10	0.39
length of time given to complete assignments	37	2.02	0.37
appropriateness of assignments	37	2.08	0.36
financial support	37	3.10	1.04
admission support	37	3.05	0.99
placement support	37	2.27	0.56

Table 5 Differences in the Mean Scores

Variables	N	Mean differences (A)	Percent
timely feedback	37	0.11	3.84
access to the teachers' counseling	37	0.06	1.98
access to the videos	37	0.17	5.84
access to the audio tools	37	0.14	4.76
library materials	37	-0.27	-11.3
length of time given to complete assignments	37	-0.25	-11.0
appropriateness of assignments	37	-0.13	-5.88
financial support	37	0.16	5.44
admission support	37	0.03	0.99
placement support	37	-0.05	-2.15

A: the mean scores' differences are computed through June survey scores subtracted from October survey scores.

Table 5 revealed that while four variables (library materials, length of time given to complete assignments, appropriateness of assignment, and placement support) have had a decrease of 11.3%, 11.0%, 5.88%, and 2.15% in mean values, other variables showed increase in mean values. It seemed that learners' attitudes have changed as the term progressed.

4.2. Results of Close-Ended Questionnaire Items

I1. I am satisfied with the timely feedback I have received.

Item one investigated timely feedback provided on the DL course. Nearly half of the respondents (48.6%) were satisfied, while less than half of the respondents (45.9%) were dissatisfied. Learners' responses on the expository questions revealed that some negative comments on the assignments and a lack of comprehensive feedback demotivated them to some extent. Hyland (2001) believed that feedback plays a fundamental role in the DL course. According to him, feedback serves as an essential function in encouraging learners.

I2. I am satisfied with the adequate access to the teachers' counseling.

With regard to the second item, nearly half of the respondents (45.9%) were satisfied, whereas 54.0% of them were dissatisfied with the range of adequate access to the teachers' counseling. The follow-up responses on question 11 showed that the quality of tutors counseling was rather poor. On the one hand, a number of learners found it unhelpful; on the other hand, others believed that teachers' support and counseling was on the right direction. They stated that consulting with specialists have always been provided to them.

I3. I am satisfied with the easy access to the videos.

Regarding item 3, Table3 revealed that the level of access to the videos was not equally supported by the respondents, with 48.6% being satisfied, 45.9% being dissatisfied, and 5.4% being strongly dissatisfied. Although nearly half of the respondents had positive attitudes, several learners were not satisfied with delivering instructions via videos. They felt that meeting this basic need was crucial to ensure the quality of course offered. Additionally, a number of comments on question 11 showed that a few respondents were faced with a great difficulty, hindering easy access to the videos. They felt that student support system should provide learners with appropriate technological tools.

I4. I am satisfied with the easy access to the audio tools.

In reply to this item, 48.6% of the respondents were satisfied with the easy access to the audio tools. On the contrary, 45.9% of the respondents were dissatisfied. On the one hand, nearly half of the respondents appreciated the extent of support provided on the course in terms of the audio materials. On the other hand, less than half of the respondents felt that the level of support was insufficient. They felt that the success of DL course would be a function of technological tools including audio materials that best meet learners' needs.

I5. I am satisfied with the library materials (e.g. books, journals, etc.).

Many respondents (91.8%) were satisfied with easy access to required books and journals. That is, they have been provided with e-books and on-line journals. On the contrary, 2.7% of the respondents were dissatisfied. One reported that limited access to on-line library materials faced him with a big problem.

I6. I am satisfied with the length of time given to complete my assignments.

Table3 showed that 2.7% of the respondents were dissatisfied, whereas majority of the respondents (94.5%) were satisfied. In other words, nearly all of the respondents felt that the deadlines given to complete assignments have been set with flexibility.

I7. I am satisfied with the extent of appropriateness of assignments.

Most of the respondents (94.5%) were satisfied with the extent of appropriateness of assignments. Perhaps types of articles and books provided on the course were in harmony with assignments given to the learners. Although, one felt that the way the assignments were presented was in sharp contrast with what he expected from the course. Thus, 2.7% of the respondents were dissatisfied.

I8. I am satisfied with the extent of financial support.

In response to item8, less than half of the respondents were either satisfied or dissatisfied. That is, 43.2% chose "agree" and 43.2% chose "disagree", respectively. Also, 5.4% of the respondents were very dissatisfied. The follow-up responses on question 11 revealed that several respondents claimed that the student support system provided them with little financial support. They believed that supportive rules related to the student fee, scholarship, and award should be set.

I9. I am satisfied with the extent of admission support.

Less than half of the respondents (45.9%) were satisfied, while half of the respondents (51.3%) were dissatisfied. They might think that the admission process was not highly supported by the Department of admission. Some respondents stated that the student support system did not provide the learners with adequate information related to admission process.

I10. I am satisfied with the extent of placement support.

More than two third of the respondents (78.3%) were satisfied with the extent of placement support. That is, the extent of support on the placement process was sufficient so that rules pertaining to distant learners were clearly explained. On the other hand, 5.4% of the respondents were dissatisfied. They may have difficulty in understanding the regulations established by the Department of placement.

4.3. Classification of Learners' Response on Open-Ended Questionnaire Items

Identifying distance learners' expectations was one of the primary concerns of this study. Thus, the main worries learners had about DL course (e.g. poor interaction) has been presented in Table 6.

Table 6 Needs and Expectations of Distant Learners

Technical and Academic Expectations
Failing access to the internet due to technical problems
Very poor conduct of video conferences
Running a number of workshops
Distributing information with precise instruction
Providing students with financial support
Improving the quality of counselling
Supporting learners with a comprehensive feedback
Humanistic Expectations
The opportunity to become acquainted with tutors and fellow students
Creating a friendly and positive atmosphere
Developing peer support
Managing the sense of isolation and disconnectedness, and encouraging the sense of belonging

5. Discussion

Learners' needs and expectations are summarized as follows:

1. The basic function of DL courses is delivering instruction to learners with the help of technology. Thus, there is no doubt that media plays very important role in such environments. Some respondents reported that "I have had difficult access to the internet. Constant disconnection problems made me frustrated". One of whom claimed that poor access made the delivery of instruction difficult. Further, a number of students argued that "despite the fact that video and audio delivery tools served as important support materials, individual lessons were rarely presented by CD-ROM or through video conferences (web)". Actually, analyses of responses revealed that some aspects of computer technology were overlooked factors; however, on-site facilitators

were introduced in the literature (Threlkeld, 1992; Threlkeld & Brzoska, 1994, Murphy & Yum, 1998) as important elements to the usefulness of the DL courses. Huang (2000) believed that students can be provided with a number of video and audio facilities through the World Wide Web.

2. The nature of DL courses makes it somewhat crucial to provide learners and instructors with opportunity to interact with one another in a supportive and friendly atmosphere. Since distance learners are human beings, their humanistic needs must be met. There is a possibility that interaction through internet may not be served as a perfect substitute, though a helpful way. Hiltz and Wellman (1997) believed that the tutor must overcome the limits and shortcomings of the technology and involve the learners in a friendly environment of interaction, which can be helpful to create the true feeling of a face-to-face classroom. Furthermore, the majority of respondents indicated that meeting fellow students, supporting each other, and meeting the tutors personally would assure that they were considered as a small part of the wider University. This finding provides evidence for Chen's claim (1997). He found the instructor-student dialogue as an essential factor in DE. Also, Robinson (1995) claimed that a regular student-tutor interaction would influence students' performance. Similarly, Palloff and Pratt (2000) stated that "collaborative learning helps learners achieve deeper understanding and knowledge through the shared exploration and creation of shared objectives" (pg. 6). Actually, when collaborative learning is not encouraged, participation is rather low and dialog is generally absent (Palloff & Pratt, 2000).

3. Furthermore, holding workshops concentrating on group work activities and developing skills was highly valued by many respondents. They reported that "through workshops, students have a great opportunity to express their expectations. Consequently, the needs of learners will be met in follow-up sessions". Further comments were as follows: (a) "Peer cooperation is very supportive", (b) "Students will be able to have a close relationship with their instructors", (c) "Being provided with handouts is another advantage of workshops", (d) "Holding workshops makes it possible for distance learners to come up with clear perceptions and ideas about the related course and instruction", (e) "Working in groups will provide students with a good opportunity to know their peers", and (f) "the follow-up sessions may help learners identify many areas for further discussion and improvement".

4. Analysis of responses made this fact clear that nearly all of the distance learners experienced a sense of frustration and isolation. One student reported that "it was my wish to reduce the sense of disconnectedness from other peers". Some reported that "decreasing the sense of isolation could appear to be a significant factor that highly influences learners' motivation and satisfaction". Rogers (1989) found anxiety and isolation as two essential problems faced with distance learners. In addition, Kirkup

and Jones (1996) mention that the individualization of learners is one of the most important weaknesses of distance learning.

5. Another area of students' criticism was that of the student financial support. Some claimed that "the support team did not provide us with any advice or information on financial matters". In addition, providing learners with clear and precise instruction was emphasized by several students as an important area that should be improved. Some mentioned that "I think, one of the common problems among learners stem from ambiguity of instructions". Another student reported that "at the beginning of the DL course, I was completely confused and overwhelmed with a lot of information and ambiguous instruction".

6. The issue of instructor-counselor was cited by many respondents as a fundamental factor in the success of distant education. A number of students stated that "participating in on-line counseling may facilitate the development of learning". One believed that "the Department of counseling can provide us with opportunity to exchange ideas and enrich the quality of learning". Moreover, the level of information provided by the counselors has been criticized by some respondents. They wanted to change the level of information provided by the related Department.

7. Lastly, a complete and comprehensive feedback was greatly appreciated by several learners. A few respondents reported that "self-study in distance education is essential; however, the tutors' feedback and comments are helpful and imperative". Another respondent felt that "the issue of feedback plays an important role in learning and acquisition process in which we can be truly guided by a comprehensive feedback". Also, a number of students reported that "a complete feedback may maximize our potential, and improve our understanding". Holmberg (1989) stated that "distance learning is a type of conversation that occurs through the mediated interaction between the tutors and the students".

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

It seems that several learners' needs and expectations were being met, considering having access to the library materials (e.g. e-books), the length of time given to complete their assignments, appropriateness of given assignments, and the extent of placement support. Although, other aspects including the timely feedback, adequate access to the teachers' counseling, easy access to the video and audio tools, and the extent of financial and admission support would appear to be worthy of investigation.

Analysis of students' responses revealed that timely feedback was an area that should be improved. It seems that proving students with complete feedback on their assignments may help them overcome the barriers (e.g. learning difficulty). Holmberg (1989) stated that submitting assignments and proving students with quick turn-around

time helped them reduce the sense of frustration. In addition, the issue of adequate access to the teachers' counseling and peer interaction might have a significant effect on distance learner performance. According to Gay and Lentini (1995), learning could be built through conversations among groups or between peers, creating the meaning collaboratively.

Furthermore, some responses showed that distance learners were critical of the level of information delivered by the counselors. Robinson (1995) believed that learner-counselor contact might positively affect student performance.

Since some respondents had a poor access to the video and audio materials required completing their assignments, it would appear to be worth facilitating the mood of delivering instructions through key materials.

As some respondents were dissatisfied with the extent of financial and admission support (in terms of precise instruction), it appears that related procedures can be improved if the student support system avoids causing ambiguity. Students should be provided with a clear map and accurate instructions. Results reveal that distance learners are relatively dissatisfied with what they are receiving.

All in all, analysis of learners' responses may provide the student support system with a better understanding of learners' expectations. In order to satisfy these expectations and narrow the available gaps, DE providers should manage students' needs to a more appropriate level. The findings of this study may inspire the student support system to pay further attention to the following items:

- DL courses should facilitate the interaction between instructor and learners.
- Regular feedback should be encouraged in the syllabus.
- Meeting students' needs regarding easy access to the web services is crucial.
- It is vital to ensure the validity and quality of instruction.
- It is imperative for service providers to allocate financial aids or any other available financial support provided by government or private sectors.
- Holding workshops as a type of active strategy may lead in increasing students' motivation.
- Incorporating numerous ways of delivering instruction (e.g. video and audio channel) seems helpful.
- Facilitating students' development through the support of instructor-counselor team is necessary.
- Reducing the sense of isolation should be in focus.

In summary, achieving the desired goals in DL courses requires organizational and technical support, careful planning, and implementation. Today, with sudden increase in the number of college students, especially at postgraduate level, there is wide use of distance education in the private and public sectors in Iran. Harnar, Brown, and Mayall (2000) mentioned that increasing numbers of learners enrolling in DL courses underscore the strong need for "thoughtful and comprehensive evolution of DE if it is to become the model of education in future" (p. 37). Therefore, constant evaluation of DL courses, meeting learners' needs, focusing on learners' expectations, and addressing major problems faced with distance learners seem to be very strong for such courses.

Research on the evaluation of student support system in DL environments is not sufficient in many respects. Thus, further research can be replicated in this area. Suggestions for further studies are put forward below.

Further research is suggested considering other factors absent in this study like faculty attitudes and its possible effect on the improvement of DL courses. This study addressed the perceptions of sophomores through the questionnaire. It seems that the interview data is also needed to provide deeper insights into the weakness or strength of DL classes. Finally, future studies may evaluate the student support system, using random sampling method with the larger sample sizes.

Appendix

Distance Learning Survey

Dear participants:

The following questionnaire is designed for a study on the needs and expectations of distance learners with the main focus on the student support system. Please read the questions carefully and select one of the options. All responses will be kept confidential.
Kind regards,

Part A:

1. I am satisfied with the timely feedback I have received.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

2. I am satisfied with the adequate access to the teachers' counseling.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

3. I am satisfied with the easy access to the videos.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

4. I am satisfied with the easy access to the audio tools.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

5. I am satisfied with the library materials (e.g. books, journals, etc.).

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

6. I am satisfied with the length of time given to complete my assignments.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

7. I am satisfied with the extent of appropriateness of assignments.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

8. I am satisfied with the extent of financial support.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

9. I am satisfied with the extent of admission support.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

10. I am satisfied with the extent of placement support.

a. strongly agree b. agree c. no idea d. disagree e. strongly disagree

Part B:

11. Which aspects of the learners' needs and expectations are neglected or overlooked?

12. Which aspects of the student support system must be improved?

Thank you for your participation.

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