Assessing the co-curricular course experience of distance learners: a Wawasan Open University model

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Assessing the co-curricular course experience of distance learners: A Wawasan Open University Model

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the implementation of the compulsory co-curriculum course in Wawasan Open University (WOU). The course focuses on providing an avenue for academic socialisation among distance learners to facilitate student-community management skills via co-curricular and social services. The purpose of this research is to determine the effect to which participation in co-curricular events enhances the achievement of student-learning outcomes in distance learners. The study was accomplished by using the pragmatist paradigm that combined the quantitative and qualitative approaches. In utilising the mixed methodology, quantitative data was generated through the online questionnaire method which was distributed among 426 students enrolled in the course. The students were asked to identify and reflect on their involvement in the course and how they viewed their participation within four correlated categories of feedback: Category 1: General information on the course. Category 2: Support provided by the tutor. Category 3: Group Assessment and teamwork. Category 4: Personal experience and challenges. The analysis of the quantitative data exhibited student satisfaction with positive feedback of the course as it correlated statistically to the success of achieving the objectives and learning outcomes. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed components of value, support, and teamwork were achieved with positive reception of the course linked to themes that contributed to the achievement of student learning outcomes.

Keywords: Student-learning outcomes, distance learners and compulsory co-curriculum.

INTRODUCTION OF THE CO-CURRICULUM COURSE

This is an evaluation study on the implementation (July 2015 semester) of the compulsory Co-Curriculum course in Wawasan Open University (WOU) which offers Online Distance Learning (ODL) degree programmes in Malaysia. Firstly it should be noted that in a traditional setting of the face-to-face learning institutes, co-curricular activities are easily implemented and have been a supplementary convention in the on campus mode. However, in an ODL institution such as WOU, the task of implementing the Co-curriculum course required careful planning and coordination to carry out and be successful. This was one of the main considerations for the university not to offer the co-curriculum course to the ODL students in earlier semesters. Secondly, these students, who were mostly working adults, would have already been involved in co-curriculum activities within their work environment and community. Therefore, the university had the opinion that it would be redundant to require these working adults to carry out co-curriculum activities as part of their course work.

In 2014, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced co-curriculum as a compulsory subject for all undergraduates, including those in open universities, under the Mata Pelajaran Umum (MPU - General Studies category). The compulsory courses under the General Studies category were designed to improve the quality of human capital in line with the Malaysia’s Strategic Plan for Higher Education (PSPTN). This is to ensure that every student who comes from the various disciplines would acquire soft skills through these General Studies subjects. The focus will be on mastering and widening the usage of soft skills. There are four sub-categories under the General Studies category. Co-curriculum falls under the fourth sub-category (also known as U4), which focuses on community management skills via co-curricular and social services. Each U4 subject has a value of 2 credit...
hours. The University will ensure that all courses offered under U4 are focused on practical community management skills via co-curricular and social services. To achieve this, students are required to be involved in societies and uniformed bodies.

The Co-curriculum course requires students to organise an outside-the-classroom activity/project that will be monitored and verified by academic staff. Activities/projects planned must meet the pedagogy requirement of the application of soft skills. An integral component of this course is self-reliance and self-dependency as the students are required to show a lot of initiative in completing this course successfully. Students are also required to independently plan, organise, interact and develop strong team work spirit and ethics in their group and not rely solely on their tutors to monitor and instruct them to work on their project. The students were also required to submit two tutor marked assignments (TMA) which consist of a proposal and a reflective journal.

The students need to attend three tutorials sessions where they were introduced to the course and helped to decide on the most suitable activity/project. Attendance is compulsory for all tutorials. During these tutorials, the students get to know other students enrolled in the course and form groups comprising of 8 – 10 members as these activities/projects will be carried out in groups (the actual size of each group will depend on the total number of students in the tutorial class). The rest of the semester was spent on planning and carrying out these activities/projects. These activities/projects must be carefully chosen as they are aimed at inculcating and enhancing the earlier mentioned skills. WOU has a very comprehensive list of suggested activities/ projects. The students are advised to take their time deliberating on the most suitable activity/project and more importantly, on the group members who are capable and willing to work together as a team.

Each group is encouraged to choose one activity/project. The chosen activity/project prescribed in this course is to be discussed with the group members and the tutor before mutually agreeing to it. This activity/project will then have to be approved by the tutor and the course coordinator. All activities/projects fully organised and conducted by the students and group members outside the tutorial classroom. These activities/projects will be monitored and awarded marks accordingly by the students’ respective tutors. Some of the marks will be given by the administrator of the place, for example, the orphanage and the old folks home where the students’ conducted their activity/project.

No prerequisite is required for this course and as such, the students can sign up for this course at any time of their studies at WOU. This course aims to develop leadership, critical thinking, team work and soft skills among many others. Among others, the activities found in this course aim to encourage, promote and support the students’ development of a range of employability. The students are expected to develop holistically through these activities. Furthermore, students would benefit at the personal and inter-personal level, thus enhancing their employment marketability.

The course aims to achieve the six objectives: to create an environment for the students’ spontaneous participation in co-curricular activities; to enable the students to apply critical thinking skills and to solve problems by the scientific approach; to arm the students with soft skills and to use them appropriately; to equip the students with numerous employability skills; to provide the students with opportunities to participate in community service activities; and to enable the students to liaise with other student bodies, clubs, societies and NGOs at the national level.

The students are expected to achieve the five learning outcomes by the end of this course. They are to develop and demonstrate a range of employability skills including leadership, critical thinking, intellectual flexibility and cognition integration skills through identified learning opportunities. They would also be able to critically reflect on the learned occasion by engagement within these activities, apply information management skills and lifelong learning skills as their main mode of learning, develop and sharpen a repertoire of skills including appreciation of human differences, cultural competency, collaboration and effective communication to embrace challenges successfully. In addition, the students would demonstrate community principles of respect, inclusion, communication,
service, social justice, and responsibility as well as an awareness of their place within a diverse community.

A wide variety of activities/projects carried out by the students included sports where a badminton tournament was organised, health talks and blood donation drives. Others included awareness campaigns such as protecting women’s rights, animal rights and environment issues. Some students volunteered their services in orphanages, old folk’s homes and crisis centres. The three major reasons the students chose those activities are as follows:

1. The consensus from the majority of the team members willing to participate in the activity/project. It is also not time-consuming and not too complicated to plan and organise.

2. They were passionate about specific courses. Therefore there were motivation and interest to organise the events.

3. The convenience of the location and having contacts with the administrators or people who can volunteer to assist the teams in carrying out the activities.

Overall, the students who enrolled in the Co-curriculum course which was offered for the first time in the July 2015 semester performed well and achieved the desired results. A total of 460 students took the course with 77 per cent of the students scored grade A, 13 per cent scored grade A-, 0.4 per cent scored grade B+, 0.7 per cent scored grade B and 4.8 per cent scored grade C. However 4.1 per cent failed because they did not meet the basic requirements of the course. The students did not complete the activity/project tasks assigned to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student involvement in co-curricular activities is important in obtaining a holistic education. It is the opportunity to integrate the academic and professional development of the students as well as providing character-building lessons that they can apply in their studies and to their personal lives. Abbott (2014) states that, “Co-curricular activities facilitate the development of various domains of the mind and personality such as intellectual development, emotional development, social development, moral development and aesthetic development” [1]. Co-curricular involvement as concluded enhances not only the social development of students, but also their intellectual development (Rombakas, 1995) [2]. Therefore, the value of co-curricular activities for students and the value of students’ participation in co-curricular activities for their own personal and professional development are high.

However for the ODL students in WOU, engagement in co-curricular campus involvements is restricted by geographic access and time constraints. Fontaine and Cook (2014) suggest that “A challenge for online programmes is developing co-curricular experiences that are adaptable and accessible to an online learning environment” [3]. The challenge for WOU was to create the co-curricular experiences in ODL environment that foster the development of student knowledge and personal development outside of the classroom. WOU gave the tutors strategic tutor training based on the course and also provided a list of possible activities/projects with a copy of the course guide to the students. Also WOU incorporated the full utilisation of the virtual ODL learning platform by using the Learning Management System (LMS) and communication technologies such as email, phone texts/Whatsapp to disseminate information between the tutor and the students and between the students with their group members.

According to Astin (1999), student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy that students engage in college experience. The theory of student involvement explicitly acknowledges that the psychic and physical time and energy of students are finite [4]. In other words, the implementation of the course and the student involvement in the activity/project will
take a share of that finite time and energy of these ODL students who are already divided between their studies, work pressures and family commitments. Astin (1999) further states that the basic ingredients of a so-called “zero-sum” game, in which the time and energy that the student invests in family, friends, job, and other outside activities represent a reduction in the time and energy the student has to devote to educational development [4]. This means even more restrictions and time constraints on distance learning students. Thus, student involvement is the second challenge of the implementation of the course in an ODL setting. Even with these two major challenges, WOU was successful in offering the course. Feedback were sought from the students in order to gage their perceptions of the course and the quality of support provided.

METHODOLOGY

This study used both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. This pragmatist paradigm of combining the qualitative and quantitative approaches within different phases of the research process was utilised (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008, pp.22) [5]. In utilising the mixed methodology, quantitative data was generated through the online questionnaire technique which was distributed among all 460 students who enrolled in the course. All students were required to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was administered using the university's Online Assignment Submission (OAS) where in order for the students to successfully submit their Reflective Journal (TMA 2), they would need to fill up and submit their feedback in the questionnaire electronically. A total of 426 students from the course participated. The other students did not because they did not submit their TMA 2. In the survey, the students were asked to identify and reflect on their involvement in the co-curriculum activities and how this participation correlated with the four categories of feedback:

a) Category 1: General information on the course
b) Category 2: Support provided by the tutor
c) Category 3: Group assessment and teamwork
d) Category 4: Personal experience and challenges

The data collected was analysed with the application of two research methods, quantitative and qualitative. The findings were then grouped into the four categories of feedback.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the quantitative data exhibited the students’ satisfaction with positive feedback of the course as it correlated statistically to the success of achieving the objectives and learning outcomes. These feedback were under the two categories, Category 1: General information on the course, and Category 2: Support provided by the tutor. In the quantitative analysis, the findings are listed below:

Fig. 1: Category 1 – General information on the course, the following questions were asked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The amount of time given for this course is sufficient.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The number of tutorials is appropriate.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. This course will help my personal development.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. This course is relevant to my university and work life.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. This course is useful for my studies.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. My level of interest in the course is low.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The overall mean was 3.57. Generally, the students found the course outcomes and the activities satisfactory. Their interest in the course was also satisfactory. From the analysis, it was found that in Question 3, 70 per cent of the students agreed that the course did help them in their personal development. In Question 4, 64 per cent of the students agreed that the course is relevant to his/her university and work life. Also for Question 5, a total 59 per cent of the students agreed that the course is useful for their studies. The findings showed a strong positive feedback regarding the course structure and the benefits gained by the students in terms of the course contributions to their academic, professional and personal developments.

Fig. 2: Category 2: Support provided by the tutor, the following questions were asked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The tutor is encouraging and supportive.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The tutor is knowledgeable about the course.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I can contact my tutor outside of class if I have questions (email, LMS, etc.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The tutor explained the requirements of the course very clearly.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The tutor was well-prepared.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The tutor provided immediate and useful feedback via phone, SMS and the LMS.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The tutor clarified areas of confusion.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The tutor stimulated my interest in the course.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The tutor demonstrated enthusiasm in facilitating the class.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The tutor provided constructive input on our group project.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall mean was 3.80. Therefore the students were satisfied with the tutor support for this first presentation. From the analysis, it was found that in Question 1, 73 per cent of the students found the tutors to be encouraging and supportive. In Question 2 and question 4, 71 per cent of the students acknowledged that the tutors were knowledgeable and explained the course requirements clearly. Also, 70 per cent of students found in Question 5 that their tutor was well-prepared and was able to provide constructive input into their group project.

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed components of value, support, teamwork and positive reception of the course that links to themes that contributed to the achievement of student learning outcomes. These feedbacks were under Category 3: Group Assessment and teamwork, and Category 4: Personal experience and challenges. From the qualitative analysis of the findings, themes that cut through as the major learning outcomes and skills obtained are listed below.

1) The improvement in planning, organising and decision making skills in coping with the challenges in the early stage of the course.
2) The improvement in co-operation and coordination skills in developing strong teamwork and leadership qualities in solving problems the students faced in interacting as a team.

3) The increment in communication skills such as information sharing with peers and social networking skills.

The data from this evaluation study on the course provided positive indications on student progress and accomplishment in building successful relationships and their ability to lead and manage tasks and problem solve with creativity and ethical insight.

CONCLUSION

The study findings will now be used to improve the subsequent presentations of the course in the hopes of better managing the challenges. The first time presentation of the Co-Curriculum course by WOU is a success. The ODL students demonstrated significant abilities to cope and perform well under the geographic and time constraints of their involvement in the activity/project carried out. Students were satisfied with the course structure and materials provided, the tutor's learning support provided and most of the students expressed their satisfaction in the experiences gained from planning and organising the activity/project of their choice and working in a team. Though there were challenges faced by WOU and the students in their involvement of the co-curricular activities, the result from the survey was encouraging as the value of the course was recognised with its objectives and learning outcomes achieved. The positive feedback suggests that the WOU model is effective in the ODL setting. It is recommended that more research go into applying this model to see how effective it can also be in other ODL institutions.

REFERENCES


ASSESSING THE CO-CURRICULAR COURSE EXPERIENCE OF DISTANCE LEARNERS: A WAWASAN OPEN UNIVERSITY MODEL

Dr Ooi Chia-Yi
Wawasan Open University
INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the implementation of the compulsory co-curriculum course in Wawasan Open University (WOU).

The course focuses on providing an avenue for academic socialisation among distance learners to facilitate student-community management skills via co-curricular and social services.

The purpose of this research is to determine the effect to which participation in co-curricular events enhances the achievement of student-learning outcomes in distance learners.
AN OVERVIEW

- The course requires students to organise an outside-the-classroom activity/project
- Students need to be independent and work together
- The course is designed for students in mastering and widening the usage of soft skills
- Attendance is compulsory for all 3 tutorials
- Submit two tutor marked assignments (TMA)
- No prerequisite is required
- Challenges in geographic and time constraints
Types of Activities

- Sports competitions
- Awareness campaigns
- Volunteering
The three major reasons the students chose those activities are as follows:

1. The consensus from the majority of the team members willing to participate in the activity/project. It is also not time-consuming and not too complicated to plan and organise.

2. They were passionate about specific courses. Therefore there were motivation and interest to organise the events.

3. The convenience of the location and having contacts with the administrators or people who can volunteer to assists the teams in carrying out the activities.
In utilising the mixed methodology, quantitative data was generated through the online questionnaire method which was distributed among 426 students enrolled in the course.

The questionnaire was administered using the university’s Online Assignment Submission (OAS) where in order for the students to successfully submit their Reflective Journal (TMA 2), they would need to fill up and submit their feedback in the questionnaire electronically.
FOUR CATEGORIES OF FEEDBACK

In the survey, the students were asked to identify and reflect on their involvement in the co-curriculum activities and how this participation correlated with the four categories of feedback:

a) Category 1: General information on the course
b) Category 2: Support provided by the tutor
c) Category 3: Group assessment and teamwork
d) Category 4: Personal experience and challenges
FINDINGS – CATEGORY 1

General Information on the Course:

1. The amount of time given for this course is sufficient.
2. The number of tutorials is appropriate.
3. This course will help my personal development.
4. This course is relevant to my university and work life.
5. This course is useful for my studies.
6. My level of interest in the course is low.
Support provided by the Tutor
1. The tutor is encouraging and supportive.
2. The tutor is knowledgeable about the course.
3. I can contact my tutor outside of class if I have questions (email, LMS, etc.)
4. The tutor explained the requirements of the course very clearly.
5. The tutor was well-prepared.
6. The tutor provided immediate and useful feedback via phone, SMS and the LMS.
7. The tutor clarified areas of confusion.
8. The tutor stimulated my interest in the course.
9. The tutor demonstrated enthusiasm in facilitating the class.
10. The tutor provided constructive input on our group project.
CATEGORY 3 AND 4

- From the qualitative analysis of the findings:

  1) The improvement in planning, organising and decision making skills in coping with the challenges in the early stage of the course.

  2) The improvement in co-operation and coordination skills in developing strong teamwork and leadership qualities in solving problems the students faced in interacting as a team.

  3) The increment in communication skills such as information sharing with peers and social networking skills.
CONCLUSION

- The course is a success in its first implementation
- ODL students demonstrated their capabilities
- High students’ satisfaction
THANK YOU