

Assessing Students' Readiness for an Open and Distance Learning Higher Education Environment

Authors : Upasana G. Singh, Meera Gungea

Abstract : Learning is no more confined to the traditional classroom, teacher, and student interaction. Many universities offer courses through the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode, attracting a diversity of learners in terms of age, gender, and profession to name a few. The ODL mode has surfaced as one of the famous sought-after modes of learning, allowing learners to invest in their educational growth without hampering their personal and professional commitments. This mode of learning, however, requires that those who ultimately choose to adopt it must be prepared to undertake studies through such medium. The purpose of this research is to assess whether students who join universities offering courses through the ODL mode are ready to embark and study within such a framework. This study will be helpful to unveil the challenges students face in such an environment and thus contribute to developing a framework to ease adoption and integration into the ODL environment. Prior to the implementation of e-learning, a readiness assessment is essential for any institution that wants to adopt any form of e-learning. Various e-learning readiness assessment models have been developed over the years. However, this study is based on a conceptual model for e-Learning Readiness Assessment which is a 'hybrid model'. This hybrid model consists of 4 main parameters: 1) Technological readiness, 2) Culture readiness, 3) Content readiness, and 4) Demographics factors, with 4 sub-areas, namely, technology, innovation, people and self-development. The model also includes the attitudes of users towards the adoption of e-learning as an important aspect of assessing e-learning readiness. For this study, some factors and sub-factors of the hybrid model have been considered and adapted, together with the 'Attitude' component. A questionnaire was designed based on the models and students where the target population were students enrolled at the Open University of Mauritius, in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Preliminary findings indicate that most (68%) learners have an average knowledge about ODL form of learning, despite not many (72%) having previous experience with ODL. Despite learning through ODL 74% of learners preferred hard copy learning material and 48% found difficulty in reading learning material on electronic devices.

Keywords : open learning, distance learning, student readiness, a hybrid model

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