EFFECTIVE TUTORING: LEARNERS' PERCEPTION AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract

One of the key elements of the open and distance learning (ODL) is the face-to-face component that is embedded in the delivery system. Due to the sheer geographical reach of an ODL institution, the use of lectures is not feasible. Therefore, most ODL institutions rely on tutors appointed according to regions to deliver education resources in a specific location e.g. learning centres. As the tutors are remotely placed, the issue of quality learning experience for the learners arises. One issue that crops up frequently is whether these tutors are able to deliver effectively. This study looks at the characteristics that learners expect to see in their tutors and their effectiveness. A survey of 176 undergraduate and postgraduate learners was conducted and the responses were derived to gauge these characteristics. A comparative look at characteristics revealed a need for institutions to pay attention to the different needs of undergraduate and postgraduate learners' educational experience. This ends with some of the support WOU provides to learners and tutors as well to enhance the experiences of both of these important stakeholders.

Keywords: *effective tutoring, learners' perception, student support, institutional responsibility*

Introduction

Wawasan Open University (WOU) is Malaysia's first not-for-profit private university dedicated to open and distance learning. The university's clientele are predominantly working adults looking for the opportunity they did not get in their formative years in obtaining a

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tertiary qualification. WOU, as all distance learning universities are, provide for this second chance to fulfil the dreams of the less fortunate. Student support is given in various forms including self-contained learning materials, online learning support via *Wawasan Learn* (Moodle based learning management system), face-to-face tutorial sessions (total of 10 hours in a semester), telephone tutoring support, video-conferencing and even web-conferencing (WizIQ or Skype).

We have 6 regional centres and 3 regional support centres that covers a wide geographical area. It is in these regional centres that the face-to-face tutorial sessions are conducted. The full time lecturers who are at the main campus are not able to reach all the regional centres due to the distance. Therefore, to avoid problems, the university appoints tutors at regional centres. Most, if not all, distance learning institutions subscribe to similar practices.

Literature Review

The question of the different functions of a tutor is something to which not much attention has been paid. Ligorio *et al.* (2002) note that a tutor's role is divided into several functions which vary according to the actual courses and are generally classified into four parts: pedagogical, managerial, technical and social. In this investigation, learners will be asked to identify the importance of these functions as they see it. Although the role of tutors are perceived as important, little research has been undertaken which relates to supporting students at a distance compared to the production of learning materials and resources (Tait, 2000).

This investigation also included several descriptors of learners including age and gender. According to Tucker (2003), some of the more important characteristics of distance learners that are necessary in studying them include age and gender. These are crucial in looking at the perception of learners.

Tutorship in distance learning institutions is a form of peer-tutoring. These tutors usually fall in the same age bracket as the learners. The challenge is always on how one teaches someone who is of the same age or even older. The tutors had to convince the learners in the classes that though they may be of similar age range, they have additional insight and credibility that allowed them to function as an instructor (Colvin, 2007).

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Peer tutors do play an important role in increasing motivation and learning for learners and tutors themselves (Miller and Mac Gilchrist, 1996). Academic and social support is essential to provide for motivation in distance learning. In distance education, broader forms of academic and social support seem to be important, regardless of whether that support is provided face-to-face or online (Price, Richardson, & Jelfs, 2007). Most studies did not look at the needs of undergraduate and postgraduate learners separately as their view of support could be different.

Background of Study

At WOU, all learners are given course materials which are for self-directed learning and these have been taken through stringent quality assurance to ensure their effectiveness. As a distance learning institution, it is vital that the best and most comprehensive support is given to distance learners. These learners, who study remotely from the university, need to be given all the necessary support to ensure they experience the right learning environment. Distance learners are often seen as being on a lonely journey. In most cases, this may be true. However, distance learning institutions will always try their best to ensure this does not remain so.

Tutorials are conducted once every month in a five month semester system. Each tutorial lasts for 2 hours: 10 hours of tutorial per course per semester. To ensure maximum support, the university employs regional tutors to deal with the learners' academic issues. There are a total of five Regional Centres (learning centres) in WOU which stretch from the north to the south of the country. As such, tutors at the respective regions are able to play a more effective role as they are closer to the local scenario which could vary from region to region. Tutors are selected from academics and practitioners who reside in the vicinity of the regional centres. This ensures that the learning environment created has a local context. Local examples can be used in the teaching which would be more effective.

Functions of Tutor

This study is based on the four different functions (managerial, social, technical and pedagogical) identified by Ligorio *et al* (2002).The context of this study is based on the importance learners place in these different

functions. Managerial function ensures that tutors manage the class effectively. For example, keeping tutorials well within the 2-hour period and discussing activities including the assignments as prescribed by the curriculum are expected. Social function includes providing support to the learners in terms of interaction among peers as well as providing constructive feedback in the assignments without undermining the learners.

As there are technicians present during tutorials in WOU, the function of a tutor in a technical context is not deemed important here. Nonetheless, the IT skills of the tutors were questioned in the survey. Pedagogy plays an important role in any educational environment. Sustaining the content of the learning process is of primary concern in a distance learning setting. Since some of the tutors do not come from an educational background, considering the leaning process is an important issue.

Method

A survey was carried out in which learners from both undergraduate classes and postgraduate classes took part. 176 learners took part in this survey; 84 postgraduate learners and 92 undergraduate learners. All the respondents were enrolled in business programmes in the School of Business and Administration of the university. A five-point Likert ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed to gauge the learners' perception level. The data collected comprises descriptive information, level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate) and the learners' perception on the importance of the qualities/ characteristics of a tutor in playing the functions as outlined above. The survey also provided for qualitative comments from learners on what they thought of their tutors' performances. In addition to the questions, respondents were asked to indicate age, entry mode and gender. Several questions were asked pertaining to the perception of the learners of the tutors' characteristics and effectiveness in providing assistance. The last portion of the survey contained an avenue for learners to provide qualitative feedback on the tutors. WE need the questionnaire shown, as an appendix)

Results and Discussion

While Cronbach's alpha (α) is often used (George and Mallery, 2003), this statistic merely indicates a measure of internal consistency. In the

survey here, very diverse questions were asked and internal consistency is not of any importance. Indeed, it might not be expected. However, it has been shown that, given a large enough sample and that the survey was conducted in an appropriate way, reliability is not a problem (Reid, 2003). With the samples used here and the way the survey was applied, the conditions for good reliability have been fulfilled.

The table below summarises the descriptive data collected. This survey collected information on the learners' age, entry mode and gender. The sample involved both undergraduate and postgraduate learners. The youngest respondent was 22 and the oldest was 54. Among the undergraduates, a 22 year old is the youngest and 42 was the oldest. The postgraduate learners ranged from 27 to 54.

Table 1
Descriptors of Respondents

Descriptors		Undergraduate (92 learners)	Postgraduate (84 learners)
Age (mean)		29	34
Entry mode	Regular Entry	76	72
	Open Entry	16	12
Gender	*Male*	53	61
	Female	39	23

The profile of the respondents is consistent with the population of the university in which most of WOU learners are males as opposed to the national phenomena of more females than males in a conventional university. Males made up of approximately 58% of the respondents with the rest (42%) are females among the undergraduates. The postgraduate learners on the other hand had a higher ratio of 73% of males as opposed to females (27%) among the respondents.

Gender plays an important role when faced with a challenging learning environment as each have its own approach when dealing with issues. Most of the undergraduate females (87.5%) and 91.8% of the male undergraduates expressed a preference for male tutors. Interestingly, the males who preferred female tutors are all within the ages of 23 and 27!

On the other hand, all the postgraduates regardless of gender preferred male tutors. The learners (82% of undergraduate and 67% of postgraduate) agreed that male tutors are less emotional and more pragmatic compared to the fairer gender. Interestingly, studies have shown that there is no real significant difference between male and female emotions among academics in higher education (Berry and Cassidy, 2013).

The youngest tutor in the university is 25 and the oldest is 64. About 63% of the tutors are male. The descriptive details of the tutor community are almost the same as the student profile. There is a certain level of comfort when learners are taught by their peers. Learning from a friend is always much easier than learning from a stranger. This also means that tutors must not be seen as resource provider alone. This was especially true when the tutors felt like they were not being used as a resource by the learners in the class (Colvin, 2007).

Regular entry learners are those who entered the programme via the national entry requirement for bachelor degrees and masters. For a bachelor degree, the expected minimum qualification is an STPM (Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia, Malaysian Higher School Certificate), which is an A-level equivalent. For postgraduate learners, a minimum of a bachelors' degree is expected. Open entry for the undergraduate is a minimum academic qualification of (Penilaian Menengah Rendah PMR, Lower Secondary Assessment) at the age of 21 with certificate of attestation and working experience. The postgraduate open entry requires candidates to be a minimum 35 years of age with an STPM and working experience at supervisory level. Most of the respondents were from the regular entry mode with 82.6% (17.4% open entry) from undergraduate and 72.6% (27.4% open entry) from postgraduate.

Undergraduate learners
The main concern of undergraduate learners is to get a good qualification in order to enhance their career opportunities and vocational opportunities. Almost all of them do not have the necessary first degree to thrive in the job market. Therefore, getting a degree is of primary concern. These learners are expecting to get the fundamental knowledge, improve comprehension levels and apply this knowledge in their working environment. A look at Table 2 shows the mean score of the respective responses given by these learners in terms of their

expectations from their respective tutors. This could act as a broad indication on how training for tutors could be conducted in future.

Data from surveys are ordinal in nature and, strictly, these numbers cannot be added or means taken. Therefore, in the study here, means must be taken only in an *indicative* sense and not in any strict integer, or numerical, sense.

Table 2
Undergraduate Perception

No	Characteristics	Mean
1	Psychological/emotional support	3.64
2	Subject matter knowledge	3.72
3	IT skills	3.18
4	Online Support	3.85
5	Class / discussion facilitation	3.56
6	Provision of Feedback	4.12
7	Resource provider	4.33

They expect the tutors to have the right amount of know-how. Some application knowledge is expected. Especially tutors from an industrial background. Approximately 63% of the open entry undergraduate learners expressed concern on knowledge level of the tutors. They wanted tutors with strong content knowledge as they find difficulty in understanding most of the materials since they do not come from a very strong educational background. Some of them have left school for many years. As shown in Table 2, for subject matter knowledge, a mean of 3.72 was recorded which is higher than the 3.56 recorded for classroom facilitation. Since they are new to tertiary education, the learners prefer if the tutors can point them in the direction as can be seen in the score of 4.33 for resource provision and the need for feedback (4.12) which is an essential support.

Postgraduate learners

Expect tutors to have the right applicative knowledge. Focus entirely on ensuring that the tutors provide learners with the correct dimension to follow:

Table 3
Postgraduate Perception

No.	Characteristics	Mean
1	Psychological/emotional support	2.53
2	Subject matter knowledge	3.58
3	IT skills	3.00
4	Online Support	3.25
5	Class / discussion facilitation	4.15
6	Provision of Feedback	4.43
7	Resource provider	3.22

The open entry postgraduate learners were not so concerned with fundamental knowledge of the tutors. They were more concerned with the applied knowledge that they expect to get. Many of the postgraduate learners (54%) were of middle to senior management positions in their organisations. They have ample practical experiences, some of which one will never find in textbooks. They expect their tutors to be one level higher than them in terms of the practical use of the theories and concepts presented in tutorials. Textbooks can be read but at the application of ideas needs to be taught.

As Table 3 shows, postgraduate learners are more concerned with getting appropriate feedback and classroom facilitation than anything else. Class facilitation is necessary as most courses in postgraduate programmes are conducted by conducting case study analysis. Managing case studies can be quite a challenge. Postgraduate learners gave a 4.15 to classroom facilitation which is higher than the 3.58 awarded for subject matter knowledge. The least important characteristics of the tutors here is the psychological or emotional support that could be provided. Ference and Vockell (1994) stated that an adult learner is; an active-learner,

experienced-based, an expert, independent, hands-on, life-centered, task-centered, solution-driven, value-driven, skill seeking, self-directing, motivated (externally), and motivated (internally). Postgraduate learners have always been the matured ones of the student population, which may negate the need to have this kind of support.

Institutional Responsibility

Distance learning institutions are responsible for the facilities and support provided to enhance learners' learning experience. Since the focus here is on the role of tutors as the learners see it, the institution plays an important role to ensure the expectations of these learners are met. In WOU, several initiatives have been put in place to improve on the efficiency and effectiveness of the tutors some of which will be discussed here.

1.   QA in Tutor Appointments
The lecturers at the main campus appoint tutors in WOU. As WOU has always committed herself to the utmost adherence to quality, there is a stringent set of steps taken in order to appoint a tutor. This is important as tutors are the 'front line soldiers' whom enhance student-instructor communication and relationship (Prakash, 2013). First and foremost, an advertisement would appear in the local newspapers as well as job recruitment websites on the vacancies for tutors based on the different courses that are offered in a semester. Interested candidates would then submit their resumes to the Human Resource Department of the university.

These applications would then be channeled to the Schools for processing. At the Schools, the lecturers would skim through the resumes and shortlist candidates for interview. All interviews are conducted with a minimum of 2 lecturers. One will look at the content knowledge and the other would focus on the overall disposition of the tutor.

The tutors are then called for an interview to the main campus (if it is convenient to them). If not, interviews will be conducted via video conferencing, teleconferencing or Skype. The tutors are normally expected to have a first degree with relevant working experience. Preference will be given to those with higher degrees with teaching experience. In many of the regional centres, due to the close proximity to

industrial parks, a large population of our tutors come from the industry. Rather than having extensive teaching experience, these tutors bring with them extensive industrial and practical experience. The issue of tutors' pedagogical function is managed here.

2. Training

In adherence to the basic principles of education, all tutors will have to go through training programmes to familiarize themselves with the tutoring needs of distance learners. Many of WOU's tutors do not come with a teaching background. As such, it is essential that they are trained in tutoring in an ODL environment. The tutors are expected to attend two types of training: generic training and specific training.

Generic Training

The respective directors conduct generic training at the regional centres. Generic training entails the familiarization of the tutors on operational matters concerning their responsibilities at WOU. Apart from explaining to them the rules and regulations of the university, issues concerning how to manage adult learners are also included. Tutors are supplied with a Tutor Training Kit which contains all the necessary information a tutor needs to know about teaching in WOU. The Kit includes a lot of resources including videos and audio clips to help tutors to get a better perspective on their responsibilities.

Course Specific Training

The course specific training, on the other hand, plays a more academic role. This is the stage where the lecturers would provide training on the contents of the course and how to manage learners.

Prior to the training, samples of the course material would be sent to the tutors for initial preparation. The course specific training will start with an ice-breaking session to get to know the tutors better. Then a sort of pop-quiz is conducted to test the tutors on resources they have read. The academics will then brief tutors on the Course overview, topics and assessment of each course. They will also highlight the key features of the Units and solicit feedback from tutors on the specified course.

The academics will then facilitate discussions on assignments by referring the tutors to the first unit of the course and directing them to the key contents and how these are related to the first TMA. They will also use prior TMAs to brief new tutors on how to comment on the TMAs.

Advice is given on how to standardise markings so as to maintain consistency. Explanation on how tutors normally interact with learners through various methods (email, telephone and *Wawasan Learn* forums) will also be given.

These are all necessary to ensure tutors give their best to the learners. Learners have commented that some tutors do not provide enough explanation during tutorials as well as on the learning management system (LMS). This training takes care of both the managerial and pedagogical concerns of learners.

3. Tutor Convention

In order to enhance professionalism in the field of tutoring, WOU organizes a tutor convention on an annual basis. This convention plays an important role in maintaining professionalism among tutors. It is hoped that tutors learn the necessary skills in providing taking care of pedagogical and social function. The tutors must be able to feel a sense of belonging to the university so that they can be more effective.

The first tutor convention held in 2009, which was themed 'Effective Collaborations for Excellence in Learning'. As part of the convention, there were workshops conducted to enhance the efficiencies of the tutors. There was a workshop on 'Maximizing Teaching styles', 'Developing Efficient and Effective Partnerships – Connecting Course Coordinators and Tutors' and 'Accelerating Adult Learning'. All this encapsulates into what would make a tutor desirable in the eyes of the learners.

Something similar was also organized in the next 2 years with workshops thrown in. All the conventions include the presentation of prizes for all the tutors present in recognition for the contributions to the university. Therefore, the tutor convention plays a three-fold approach in maintaining relationship between the tutors and the university, appreciating the tutors' efforts and provides additional training. Unfortunately, it was necessary for this convention to be put on hold for a couple of years although the university is currently is planning to revive the tutor convention as there was merit in its original conception.

4. Tutorial Observation and Moderation of TMA Marking

As part of the quality assurance efforts of the university, all tutorials are observed to ensure compliance to basic tenets of teaching. Tutorials are visited twice a semester; first and third tutorial. The first visit is to look out

for issues and the third is to ensure the issues do not recur. As a principle, all new tutors and old tutors teaching new courses are observed.

Should there be any issues found with a tutor, advice and suggestions for improvement is immediately given to the tutor as a feedback mechanism. Sometimes, tutors also need clarification, which they can be obtained from the visiting academic. Therefore, quality assured and relationship maintained.

Tutors not only teach the learners but they are also expected to mark the assignments. Samples of TMAs for all courses are moderated to ensure that grading is in line with the marking scheme provided. Samples of TMAs (high, medium, low) are selected from each class and moderated by the academic. This would take care of the quality of the grading issue. In the process, the academics will also look for constructive comments provided by the tutors. If comments were lacking in the assignments, the tutors would be advised to make sure they provide them in future.

Conclusion

This investigation started out to look at attributes that tutors expected to possess based on learner profiling. The investigation showed that undergraduate and postgraduate learners have different preferences when it comes to these attributes. Undergraduate learners want tutors with strong content knowledge, feedback and the ability to provide academic and social support. Postgraduate learners prefer tutors with strong class management / facilitation skills and the ability to provide quality feedback as learning support. It was shown that postgraduate learners do not emphasize on psychological / social support as their maturity level is seen as higher.

The role and responsibility of the institution was also included to elaborate on the initiatives taken by the university to try to realise the expectations of the learners. On the other hand, the perceptions of tutors were left out in this investigation as that would elongate this investigation and time was not on the researcher's side. It would be interesting to see how the perceptions of the tutors interlink with the learners and how well this relationship fits into the institutional norm. That would be left for future research.

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