

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF THE ONLINE LEARNING OF POSTGRADUATES DURING COVID - 19 PANDEMIC IN SRI LANKA A CASE STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO THE SABARAGAMUWA UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The core purpose of this study is to identify the preferred mode of online learning during the COVID - 19 pandemic situation in Sri Lanka with the cause/s for their preference. The specific objective of the current study is to identify the issues occur during e-learning. The primary data for this study have been gathered disseminating a well-structured questionnaire which consists of both open-ended and close-ended questions. 100 questionnaires were distributed among the postgraduates who following various courses in Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (SUSL) with the help of email and social media platforms and gathered 85 responses usable for this study. Convenience sampling technique has been used to select the sample and gathered data have been analyzed with the help of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The results of the data analysis indicated that more than 65% of the students were happy with online education during this Covid - 19 pandemic situation. Most of the students (70%) preferred to use “Zoom” platform for their online education due to the user friendliness. But 30% of the respondents were demanded ‘MS Teams’ because specially the advantage of repeatedly follow the recorded sessions and easiness of accessing the learning materials. As per the second objective, the issues during the online learning of postgraduates were mainly the internet connectivity issues (56%) and lack of concentration (34%) than the physical mode. Based on the facts, this study recommends to develop any virtual reality applications for online learning including the features that the student’s desire for an effective learning experience. Further, universities can conduct online training programs for both students and lecturers regarding online education tools. The implications suggested by this study will be vital for academics, government authorities and entrepreneurs to identify the preferences on e-learning and address innovatively the revealed issues while contributing to make the online sessions more effective and interactive.

Keywords: Covid - 19 pandemic, E-learning, online learning, postgraduates

1. Introduction

The world is changing so fast in all aspects with the unforeseen challenges set by the COVID - 19 pandemic. Although the changes have become unpredictable, the world is forwarding while

adopting and bearing the challenging situations. In the face of this COVID – 19 pandemic, many sectors in Sri Lanka have turned to the assist of internet as their primary means of providing services. The education sector has also suffered a lot due to the Covid – 19 pandemic. However, when the mode of learning has shifted from physical to online, the exemplar transference has initiated both advantages and disadvantages in student’s academic life. Online learning platforms varies from Learning Destination Sites, Traditional Commercial Learning Management Systems, Open-Source Learning Management Systems, Modern Learning Management Solutions, Learning Management Ecosystems and Custom-Built Platforms. Moodle, Zoom, Google Classroom, Udemy, Coursera, YouTube are few examples. Among these available methods some are widely used by academic purposes. This study investigated the preferred method of online learning and reasons with reference to the postgraduates who are currently studying in Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. Therefore, the research question which motivates to conduct the current study are as follows.

1. What is the most preferable online learning mode for postgraduates?
2. What are the issues which are facing by postgraduates during online learning?

This study has been conducted based on the sample collected from Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (SUSL). Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (SUSL) was established in 1991 as the 12th National University of the country as a contemporary liaison to the Minipura tradition with the noble intention to widen the third eye of many children of our mother country.

2. Methodology

The primary data have been gathered disseminating a well-structured questionnaire which consists of both open-ended and close-ended questions. The questionnaire was developed after carefully reviewing the existing literature. Around 100 questionnaires were sent to the postgraduates who following various courses in SUSL via email and social media platforms. Convenience sampling technique has been used to select the sample. There were only 85 responses out of 100 were usable for this study. To analyze the gathered data both qualitative and quantitative methods have to be used. Basic analysis have been done with the help of SPSS software. The answers received for open-ended questions have been analyzed by thematic analysis. Therefore, mixed method approach was adopted to the current study.

3. Results/Analysis and Discussion

The results of the data analysis indicated that more than 65% of the students were happy with online education during this Covid – 19 pandemic period. However, 17.3% of respondents preferred the offline learning as well. Most of the students (70%) preferred to use ‘Zoom’ platform for their online education due to the user friendliness. But, 30 % of the respondents were demanded ‘MS Teams’ platform due to the ease of access to the recorded sessions and learning materials repeatedly. Based on the responses received for the questionnaire, the main problems which are being faced by postgraduates identified as follows.

3.1 Connectivity Issues

As most postgraduate students are employed with a manageable income, every student who have enrolled for post graduate studies have a smart device which can connect to the internet via Wi-Fi or mobile data. The vital resource which is lacking is in fact having good internet coverage, which is an essential factor for distance learning. Although they are interested in learning, they are frustrated by the lack of internet access. The speed of the internet connection and the quality of the network play an important role in how quickly a student can get to class and not miss any live sessions.

3.2 Technical failures

Although a strong internet connection is essential for online study, many students are not well equipped. They face technical problems because they do not much aware of computer applications. Most postgraduate students are not from the age of smartphones and tablets so general knowledge of operations will be less compared to the younger generation of undergraduates. Technical problems can effect on lowering students up to online learning.

3.3 Being novel to the online learning system

Today, technological advancement seeks to lead to more meaningful and higher quality instruction, delivery and better learning skills. There are various tools available to optimize this objective. Virtual classroom can be considered as the most popular tool. However, this online education is still a new training for students. Therefore, it will take some more time to adapt to the system and get the most out of it. Apart from the factors affecting to demotivation, some the reasons that make students motivated and attracted towards online learning has been discovered through data analysis. However, few respondents have recognized the calm and organized manner of learning atmosphere as one of the major reasons to motivate toward e-learning. Further, they expressed that they feel comfortable with the systematized manner of the lectures flow in online context since it assists them to keep focus well. Furthermore, respondents mentioned few other reasons such as flexibility in lecture time, capability of using recording for later studies etc. to make them motivate to study online.

4. Conclusion and Implications

Education faces ever-changing new demands with the increasing complexity of modern times. In this study, various data collected from post graduate students of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka have been analyzed and interpreted. Hence, the students need to be sensitive to the changes and has to be ready for the future changes. They have to possess awareness, knowledge and skills towards online learning. Respondents stated that the following recommendations will help to reduce the problems regarding online learning and the following suggestions will cause to improve their interest on e-learning. Based on the facts, this study highly recommends developing any virtual reality application system for conducting online sessions. Universities can also conduct online training programs on online educational tools using these statistics. Moreover, the government should consider providing students with a convenient internet connection and internet providers should analyze and address coverage issues in rural areas to minimize the identified issues. Although, the pandemics like Covid - 19 has been there in various countries around the world even in different names, a pandemic like Covid - 19 is extremely novel experience for Sri Lankans. Because of that reason, there are only few number of studies have been conducted combining this Covid - 19 pandemic situation and the education sector. The current study has primarily addressed that research gap. Moreover, this study is most relevant for the academics as it facilitates them in gaining a better understanding of the postgraduates' opinions towards online learning in this pandemic situation and identify their issues related to e-learning. Recommended strategies will also be vital for academics, government authorities and entrepreneurs to identify the preferences on e-learning and address innovatively the revealed issues while contributing to make the online sessions more interactive.

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