



Student Satisfaction in Distance Education

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Abstract: Student satisfaction, which reflects how students perceive their learning experiences, is an important measure in program evaluation in distance education. Students with a higher level of satisfaction are more persistent in their learning, and research evidences suggest that providing students a satisfying experience helps to maintain and improve retention. The present study was designed to assess satisfaction among distance learners with respect to their background variables namely, age, sex, locale, marital status, previous experience in distance education, socio-economic status, employment status and course undertaken. The findings revealed that gender, previous experience in distance education course and employment status of distance learners has a significant relationship with satisfaction.

Keywords: Distance education, student satisfaction.

I. Introduction

The generic term “distance education” includes many different terms that have previously been used to describe education that takes place in a non-traditional environment. Distance education focuses on studying at a distance from the instructor, and on learning with the assistance of learning materials such as video-cassette recorded lectures, notes, packaged syllabus and printed materials, or from any other electronic materials and tools. US Distance Learning Association (2012) define distance learning as “the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction”. It is a type of educational mode that allows for flexibility in terms of mode and delivery. Distance education offers instructors and students a flexible learning setting in terms of time and location. Thus, distance learning programs accommodate a variety of students who are not able to attend the face-to-face course such as those who have geographical barriers or are employed or have any kind of physical disability. Garrison and Shale (1987) wrote that the distinguishing feature of distance education was that it could “extend access to education to those who might otherwise be excluded from an educational experience”. Despite the successes in terms of increased access to education, quality issues are still much debated in regard to distance learning. There may be a number of issues related with distance education especially lack of personal contact with teachers and peers. In distance learning, there may be differences in how students from different cultures view the learning process and prefer it to take place. Thus the distance learning format may not be satisfying to all the students (Carr, 2000; Rivera & Rice, 2002) for a variety of reasons. Here, the students’ satisfaction implies their perception towards distance education experiences i.e. starting from the entry till completion of the course and perceived significance of distance education. Astin, (1993) defined student satisfaction in term of student’s perception towards his/her college or university experience, and perceived significance of the education that he received from an institution.

Allen et al. (2002) argued that in any educational institution, the satisfaction of a student can be determined from his level of pleasure as well as the effectiveness of the education that the student experiences. Eom et al. (2006) used 22 indicators to identify six factors (student self-motivation, student learning style, instructor knowledge and facilitation, instructor feedback, interaction, course structure) affecting two latent variables - perceived student satisfaction and learning outcomes. Letcher and Neves (2010) reports that self-confidence, extra-curricular activities and career opportunities, and quality of teaching in general are the factors with greater impact on satisfaction and advising and quality of teaching in the subject matter have little or no effect on overall student satisfaction. Haque et al. (2011) identified independent factors that can affect student satisfaction based on services offered by universities. These include quality of teaching, student research facilities, library book collections and services, campus infrastructure, canteen facilities, space for group discussions, sport programs, ICT (Computer and Internet) facilities etc.

Thus, it becomes imperative to understand student satisfaction with distance-learning courses, as it has been shown that retention in distance-learning classes is heavily influenced by satisfaction with the course. Arbaugh (2000) asserted that students’ satisfaction is related with their perceptions of its quality and their intention of taking future courses via distance learning. Levy (2003) views that student’s satisfaction with distance learning courses is a key aspect to measure the effectiveness of distance learning. The more students are satisfied, the more likely they are to do well in the course (Keller, 1983; Pike, 1993).

Distance learning environments may be more suitable for some students than others (Arbsugh & Stelzer, 2003). Their satisfaction may be associated with a number of personal characteristics. Therefore, it is imperative to study the students' satisfaction among different types of distance learners so as to re-design the distance learning programmes to foster satisfying and successful learning experiences in distance education.

II. Purpose of the Study

The present study was designed to see the difference in the satisfaction levels of different groups of distance learners with regards to their age, sex, native place, marital status, employment status, economic status, mode of previous education, and course undertaken at present.

III. Methodology

The descriptive survey method was used to conduct this piece of research. To measure student satisfaction a scale was constructed by the researcher which comprised of six dimensions of distance education, namely, *administration*, *study material*, *teacher's behaviour*, *personal contact programme*, *evaluation* and *purposefulness* for which the satisfaction was assessed. A sample of 600 distance learners pursuing post graduate courses was taken. Out of these 600 students, 583 completed the satisfaction scale. To analyze the data, a number of statistical techniques were used depending upon the nature of the data. To see the relationship between age and satisfaction level of distance learners, product moment coefficient of correlation was worked. T-test were employed to see the differences in satisfaction levels of learners with respect to their *gender* (male or female), *marital status* (married or unmarried), *native place* (rural or urban), *mode of previous education* (i.e. previous course completed from distance mode or face-to-face mode), *course undertaken* presently (professional or non-professional). For the variable having more than two groups such as *employment status* (Full Time, Part Time and Unemployed) and *economic status* in terms of family income (less than 20000, between 20000 and 50000 and above 50000 per month), one way ANOVA has been used to find out the difference between groups in their satisfaction in distance education.

IV. Results

• Age and student satisfaction

Table 1: Relationship between age and students'

		Administration	Study Material	Teacher Behaviour	Personal Contact Programme	Evaluation	Purposefulness	Satisfaction
Age	r	.103*	.066	.018	.061	.010	.021	.082*
	P-value	.013	.111	.669	.140	.811	.617	.048

The values of co-efficient of correlation in Table 1 indicates that there is a significant positive correlation between age of the distance learners and their overall satisfaction in distance learning (.082, $p < .05$). Along with this, only at one dimension of satisfaction out of the six i.e. administration, there came out a significant correlation with the age of the distance learners (0.103, $p < .05$). These findings imply that older is the student higher is the level of his/her satisfaction with distance learning. In other words, it may be said that older students are more satisfied than their younger counterparts in distance education.

• Gender and student satisfaction

The gender difference in student satisfaction was analyzed by employing t-test. The results have been depicted in table 2:

Table 2: Comparison between male and female distance learners on their Satisfaction

Dimensions of Satisfaction	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
Satisfaction with Administration	Male	231	25.28	5.025	3.086	.002**
	Female	352	26.46	4.158		
Satisfaction with Study Material	Male	231	33.00	5.041	.888	.375ns
	Female	352	32.64	4.600		
Satisfaction with Teacher Behaviour	Male	231	12.03	2.060	1.783	.075ns
	Female	352	12.43	3.002		
Satisfaction with Personal Contact Programme	Male	231	27.03	4.476	.271	.786ns
	Female	352	27.12	4.195		
Satisfaction with Evaluation	Male	231	14.97	3.370	2.514	.012*
	Female	352	14.27	3.175		
Satisfaction with Purposefulness	Male	231	6.43	1.210	3.017	.003**
	Female	352	6.15	1.031		
Overall Satisfaction	Male	231	118.73	14.705	.293	.770ns
	Female	352	119.08	13.677		

As shown in table 2, t-values on three dimension of satisfaction came out to be significant. These dimensions are administration (3.086 $p < 0.002$), evaluation (2.514, $p < 0.012$) and purposefulness (3.017 $p < 0.003$).

For satisfaction with *administration*, female students ($M_2 = 26.46$) found to be more satisfied than male students ($M_1 = 25.28$). On the dimension of *evaluation*, males are more satisfied ($M_1 = 14.970$) as compared to their female counterparts ($M_2 = 14.27$) in their satisfaction with evaluation system in distance education. Satisfaction for *Purposefulness of the course* is higher in the male students ($M_1 = 6.43$) than females ($M_2 = 6.15$) in distance education.

- **Satisfaction and Native Place**

The students belonging to rural area were compared with those who belong to urban area for their levels of satisfaction in distance education by employing t-test. The results of t-tests showed that there existed no significant difference between these two groups of learners on even a single dimension of satisfaction scale. In other words it may be said that satisfaction among distance learners is not associated with the place where they live.

- **Satisfaction and Marital Status**

The married distance learners were compared with unmarried distance learners for their satisfaction in distance education by employing t-test. The values of t-tests indicated that no significant difference existed in the satisfaction levels of distance learners in relation to their marital status. Whether the distance learners are married or unmarried, their satisfaction in distance education is not affected.

- **Satisfaction and Economic Status**

The distance learners were categorized into three groups on the basis of their economic status in terms of their family income i.e. less than Rs. 20000 ; between Rs. 20000 to 50000; and above 50000 per month. The students of these three groups were compared for their satisfaction in distance education by employing one way ANOVA.

None of the F-value came out as significant. It shows that there exist no association between economic statuses of distance learners and their satisfaction in distance learning.

- **Satisfaction and Mode of Previous education**

On the basis of the modes of previous education, the distance learners were classified into two groups one, who had completed their previous education through face-to-face mode (on-campus) and another group constituted of those learners who had done their previous course through distance education itself. Thus, the first group of learners was novice in distance education and the second groups have the experience of distance education. These two groups of students were compared for their satisfaction in distance education by employing t-test. The results have been depicted in table 3.

Table 3: Comparison between distance learners based on their previous education through Regular/Distance Mode for their Satisfaction in Distance Education:

Dimensions of Satisfaction	Mode of Previous Education	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
Satisfaction with Administration	Regular	257	26.05	4.274	.262	.793ns
	Distance	326	25.95	4.770		
Satisfaction with Study Material	Regular	257	32.09	4.450	3.115	.002**
	Distance	326	33.32	4.962		
Satisfaction with Teacher Behaviour	Regular	257	12.18	1.776	.804	.422ns
	Distance	326	12.34	3.210		
Satisfaction with Personal Contact Programme	Regular	257	26.85	4.119	1.183	.237ns
	Distance	326	27.27	4.443		
Satisfaction with Evaluation	Regular	257	14.19	3.181	2.348	.019*
	Distance	326	14.83	3.314		
Satisfaction with Purposefulness	Regular	257	6.05	1.110	4.215	.000***
	Distance	326	6.43	1.087		
Overall Satisfaction in Distance Education	Regular	257	117.40	12.552	2.401	.017*
	Distance	326	120.15	15.088		

As shown in table 3, t-values on three dimension of satisfaction come out to be significant. These dimensions are study material (3.115, $p < .01$), evaluation (2.348, $p < .05$) and purposefulness (4.215, $p = 0.000$) and also on for overall satisfaction (2.401, $p < .05$). It indicates that distance learners who are novices in distance learning (i.e. completed previous course from face-to-face mode and have admitted for the first time in distance education) and those who have the experience of distance learning (as they have completed their previous course in distance mode) differ significantly in their satisfaction levels towards study material, evaluation procedures and

purposefulness of the course. The mean values of the two groups on these three dimensions and for overall satisfaction depict that experience learners of distance education systems are more satisfied than those who are novice in this system.

- **Satisfaction and Course undertaken**

The distance learners in Professional courses were compared with those in Non- Professional courses for examining the difference in the satisfaction levels of these two categories of distance learners on the basis of course undertaken presently. The results of t-tests have been depicted in table 4:

Table 4: Comparison between distance learners in Professional and Non Professional courses on their Satisfaction in Distance Education:

Dimensions of satisfaction	Course Undertaken	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
Satisfaction with Administration	Professional	208	26.61	4.593	2.441	.015*
	Non Professional	375	25.65	4.503		
Satisfaction with Study Material	Professional	208	33.19	4.678	1.540	.124ns
	Non Professional	375	32.55	4.825		
Satisfaction with Teacher Behaviour	Professional	208	12.34	3.017	.484	.628ns
	Non Professional	375	12.23	2.466		
Satisfaction with Personal Contact Programme	Professional	208	27.28	4.420	.826	.409ns
	Non Professional	375	26.98	4.242		
Satisfaction with Evaluation	Professional	208	14.69	3.136	.798	.425ns
	Non Professional	375	14.47	3.340		
Satisfaction with Purposefulness	Professional	208	6.31	1.073	.731	.465ns
	Non Professional	375	6.24	1.135		
Overall Satisfaction in Distance Education	Professional	208	120.42	14.416	1.900	.058ns
	Non Professional	375	118.11	13.844		

The course of study i.e. Professional or Non professional has no significant relationship in determining the satisfaction of distance learners except for one area i.e. satisfaction with administration. In case of satisfaction of distance learners at administrative level (2.441, $p < 0.015$), professional course students ($M_1 = 26.61$) found to be more satisfied as compared to the students who were pursuing non professional course ($M_2 = 25.65$).

- **Satisfaction and Employment Status**

The distance learners were categorized into three groups on the basis of their employment status, namely, Full Time employed, Part-time employed and Unemployed. The satisfaction levels of these three groups of distance learners for their experiences in distance education were compared and difference were seen by employing one way ANOVA. The results have been presented in table 5:

Table 5: Comparison between Full Time employed, Part-time employed and Unemployed distance learners for their Satisfaction in Distance Education.

Dimensions of satisfaction	Employment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F-value	p-value
Satisfaction with Administration	Full Time	148	26.42	3.886	1.399	.248ns
	Part Time	122	26.21	5.494		
	Unemployment	313	25.71	4.437		
Satisfaction with Study Material	Full Time	148	32.78	4.649	10.076	.000***
	Part Time	122	34.40	4.093		
	Unemployment	313	32.15	4.948		
Satisfaction with Teacher Behaviour	Full Time	148	12.40	3.288	.878	.416ns
	Part Time	122	11.99	1.969		
	Unemployment	313	12.32	2.588		
Satisfaction with Personal Contact Programme	Full Time	148	26.94	4.096	.928	.396ns
	Part Time	122	27.56	4.759		
	Unemployment	313	26.97	4.216		
Satisfaction with Evaluation	Full Time	148	14.38	3.174	10.339	.000***
	Part Time	122	15.71	2.337		
	Unemployment	313	14.17	3.518		
Satisfaction with Purposefulness	Full Time	148	6.24	1.054	5.167	.006**
	Part Time	122	6.54	.955		
	Unemployment	313	6.16	1.180		
Overall Satisfaction in Distance Education	Full Time	148	119.16	14.142	5.507	.004**
	Part Time	122	122.42	13.673		
	Unemployment	313	117.48	14.010		
	Total	583	118.94	14.082		

As shown in table 5, F-values on three dimension of satisfaction came out to be significant. These dimensions are study material (10.076, $p < .000$), evaluation (10.339, $p < .000$) and purposefulness (5.167, $p = 0.006$). The f-value for overall satisfaction also came out to be significant (5.507, $p = .004$). Further, the t-values indicates towards significant differences between part-time with both full-time as well as unemployed distance learners in their levels of satisfaction in distance education. The distance learners who have part-time employment are more satisfied in distance education especially with study material, evaluation system and purposefulness of the course than their counterparts who either have full-time employment or do not have any job (unemployed).

The population of distance learners is composed mainly part time adult students who have numerous and demanding commitments to work, family, and social lives and seek courses through distance mode to enhance their qualifications and skills. These students tend to be more vulnerable to factors encroaching on their academic progress. Their other commitments assume greater degrees of obligation and necessity at least during incipient stages of distance education. Thus there is a significant relationship between satisfaction and employment status of distance learners. The earlier studies also reveals that part time employed distance learners are more satisfied than full time or unemployed.

Major Findings

The results of the statistical analysis revealed that age, gender, employment status, previous experience in distance education and employment status of the distance learners determine their satisfaction in distance education. It has been found that older learners, those who already have experience of distance learning, part-time employed are more satisfied in their experiences in distance education as compared to their counterparts who are younger, novice in distance education, and full-employed or unemployed. Female distance learners did not differ in their overall satisfaction in distance education from their male counterparts but showed differences in three dimensions, namely, administration, where they were more satisfied than male learners and were less satisfied than male distance learners with evaluation system and purposefulness of the distance education. The marital status, economic status, native place of distance learners has no relation with their satisfaction in distance education.

V. Educational Implications

The findings of the present investigation have implication for both distance learners and authorities in distance education. The authorities should organize special orientation programmes for such learners who found to be less satisfied i.e. younger learner and novice in distance education system where they should be acquainted with the different facets of distance education and how to cope up with new system of learning. The administrative staff at distance education institutes should be trained to deal with distance learners. Flexibility system should be there for the learners especially who are full-time employed so that they may complete their education with their pace. The distance learners should try to adapt to the new situation and may ask for the help from the authorities in case of dissatisfactory experience with any aspect of distance education. Therefore, both learners and distance education providers should work together to make distance education a satisfying experience for the distance learners.

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