

# **A DIAGNOSIS OF LEARNER OPINIONS IN BA (HUMANITIES) PROGRAMME OFFERED BY INSTITUTE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF SWAZILAND, SWAZILAND**

**Professor Satish Rastogi, Coordinator (Research & Evaluation), Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland, Private Bag 04, Matsapha, Swaziland ; Email [satishrastogi11@gmail.com](mailto:satishrastogi11@gmail.com)**

## **Abstract**

This Programme Evaluation for BA (Hum) had been based on past learners' opinion about various activities at Input, Process, and Output stage with a purpose to raise quality of every service rendered by the University of Swaziland to new and present students for this programme. The students remain at a distance and hardly meet with academics helping them. This was a Survey type research using Decision Management Approach based on Learner opinion on various issues drawn after a systemic analysis of various activities at Input, Process and Output stages of BA (Humanities) programme. A comprehensive Questionnaire/Opinionnaire having both closed and open type items covered in 28 pages was sent to about 800 past students, but, only 79 had answered the same and so, became sample for this study. They resisted the rigidity of conventional system rules and advocated for more openness at various stages. The academic counsellors do not follow the Modules, but the Books prescribed for conventional system. They desired separate question papers and examination dates being different than conventional system. They find themselves equally competent in comparison with conventional graduates while at work. They need their programme guide and orientation sessions to cover how to study and write assignments as well as more clarity on some pages of course content. They need options in selecting a question from among many during examination. They expressed some difficulties in understanding the content somewhere mostly in English Courses. The dealing by IDE staff with them was appreciated. They need frequent supplementary examinations to improve their grades quickly if had failed in one or more courses. They could not smell the meaning Openness and On Demand Examination, and so, most of them did not comment on these issues. Recommendations for raising quality may be implemented by the University of Swaziland.

## **Introduction**

A need for Programme Evaluation has been felt as essential with Distance Education system, because the distance learner meets the system hardly or occasionally, and so, learner feedback about various activities is a matter of concern. On the other hand, in conventional system, the learner meets his/her teachers as well as others, very often and a two way traffic of feedback goes on regularly along with teaching learning process. Also, the Distance education system has been labeled as an Industry and the distance learner has been characterized as a customer of education. The customer opinion is of much value for every industry for improvements as it would make every activity as user friendly. Also, quality of our product is a matter of concern. The society is anxious to know the competencies gained by a distance learner and its comparison with a conventional learner for the same Programme. These are very important issues to be taken up by the system of Distance education if it wants to stand as an alternate mode for imparting any type of need based mass education. There may be many approaches to Programme evaluation. But, for convenience these conceptual frameworks for evaluation are clustered into five categories, although some of the frameworks are sufficiently multifaceted that they could appear in more than one category. Most of these 'models' have focused broadly on programme evaluation, although some are focused more specifically on curriculum evaluation. It should be noted that these frameworks deal with methods, but, not techniques. These may be: Performance- Objectives Congruence Approach, Decision – management Approach, Judgment –Oriented Approach, Adversarial Approach, and, Pluralist- Intuitionist Approach.

## **Course Structure of BA (Humanities) Programme**

Normally, the B.A. Humanities Degree Programme shall consist of two subject majors chosen from the following: English Language and Literature; African Languages and Literature; Modern Languages and Literature (French); History, and Theology and Religious Studies. Each subject major shall comprise of a specified set of course modules (usually about twenty) spread across the four levels. Subject majors shall be offered whenever the need, resources and modules are available. In addition to the course modules in the subject majors, students shall also take two Academic Communication Skills, ACS 102: English for Academic Purposes, ACS 103: English for Specific Purposes course modules and HSC 113: HN Prevention, Infection and Management of AIDS module. Normally, to complete the B.A. Humanities Degree Programme, a student shall take and pass a minimum of forty-one (41) modules, nine (9) in Level one, eight (8) in Level two, twelve (12) in Level three and twelve (12) in Level four. Not all optional courses shall be offered in any one year. In levels two (2), three (3) and four (4), the choice on the optional courses in History and in Theology and Religious Studies shall be governed by the respective Departmental Special Regulations. Some courses in Level II, Level III and Level IV in the Department of African Languages and Literature have pre-requisites: Pre-requisites for AL210 are AL 110 and AL 112, for AL 310 is AL 211, for AL 410 is AL 310, for AL 411 is AL 410, for AL 412 is AL 311 and, for AL 413 is AL 312.

### **Objectives of this study**

In order to make an in-depth study of this programme, following objectives were framed as backbone of this research project. The methodology of data collection and its analysis had moved around these objectives.

1. To explore different other admission criteria and publicity ways for making this programme available to a large number of persons in Swaziland.
2. To diagnose the course content where learners faced some difficulties and needed more explanation for understanding the same and suggest ways for meeting these difficulties.
3. To seek students' opinion about Learner evaluation procedure and Question paper formats with their pattern, and, recommend for modifications, if really needed.
4. To take a stock of learners' expectations from various Units of Institute of Distance Education and other supporting infrastructure situated in University of Swaziland for making their services learner friendly.
5. To make learning material more learner friendly in Self-Instructional material format.
6. To suggest for bridging the gap between expectations and perceptions during contact sessions organised for human support to students.
7. To bring more Openness/flexibility at various stages of this programme for enabling the students feel free from undesired hindrances.
8. To examine present scenario of 'Peer-group' interaction among students and suggest for strengthening the same.
9. To suggest for using an appropriate technology at various stages of this programme for bringing a quality in various activities.
10. To smell Academic growth, Vocational competency and financial gains by Graduates after completing B.A. (Humanities) programme.
11. To examine the drop out causes among B.A.(Humanities) students and suggest remedies to control this drop out.
12. To raise the quality of every service rendered to students for B.A. (Humanities) programme by Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland.

## Research Issues faced during this Study

Following issues were before the investigators during this study.

- What is the utility of this B.A. (Hum) programme through distance mode?
- Can this Programme through distance mode meet the academic needs, career needs and finally financial needs of new graduates?
- What is Social utility of this programme in Swaziland?
- Can this programme be made more learners friendly?
- Can the suggestions made by past students be accepted and implemented by University of Swaziland through Institute of Distance Education?

## Methodology Adopted

For the purpose of Research tool development, a systemic analysis of these programme activities was done to club them under Input, Process and Output stages as shown below.

**Input stage:** Entry Qualification, Fee Structure ,Publicity Ways, Student Registration, Financial Assistance, Orientation Handbook, Programme Guide, Total Time / Duration, Programme Schedule, Content Presentation, Audio Video Support Style, Admission Criteria, Quality of Learning Material, Reference material at UNISWA Library, Expectations from Institute of Distance Education, Rules and Regulations , Expectations from University of Swaziland, Library rules for Distance Learners, Utility of Orientation Session, Relevancy between Content and Course Syllabus, and, Confusions as an isolated learner.

**Process Stage:** Creation of Interest during Study, Content Clarity, Help by IDE Staff, Motivation to Students, Peer Group Interaction, Problems during Self -study, Contact Session Time table, Feedback from Academic Counsellors, Interaction with Academic Counsellors, Using Internet for interaction among students, Routine work as an obstacle to Self-Study, Training to Teachers, Students' Training, Difficulties in Writing Assignments ,Flexibility, Difficulties in Project Completion, Cooperation with UNISWA Library, Expectations from Contact Sessions, Individual Attention by Academic Tutors, Use of some other Teaching Aids, Human relations with Academic Tutors, Expectations from Student Support Services,

**Output stage:** Programme Meeting – Academic needs, Vocational needs, Financial needs, Grading and Marking System, Format and Language of Question Papers, Project Report writing difficulties, Procedure for Assignment submission, Reason for Dropout, On Demand Examination , Examination Rules, Graduation Ceremony, Quality of B.A.(Hum) Programme, Role of Assignments in End Examination, Student Evaluation by Examiners ,Competency comparison between Conventional and Distance learners, Comments on Assignments by Academic Counsellors, End Examination Procedure, Changes in Text Books- Contents ,Presentation Style ,Material .

This research was a diagnostic survey of learners' opinion using an Opinionnaire developed by the research team and annexed as Annexure one to this report. The fine distribution of various activities under Input, Process, and, Output categories shown on pages 20 to 22 were basis for developing the Opinionnaire. Internal seminars within Institute of Distance Education (IDE) provided collective wisdom to finalise this Opinionnaire. It was sent by post to about 800 past students who had studied all courses assigned to them for study in different years and witnessed various situations as well as had confronted with systemic problems from time to time. They had successfully completed this programme. After a long wait and reminders the project team got back only 79 Questionnaires duly filled in. This group of 79 past

students had been considered as sample for this study. An item wise analysis had been done for all 79 respondents and was concluded and presented in this report. This analysis helped the project team to make some recommendations for implementation.

### Sample for this Study (Year wise)

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
Respondent's Number	01	06	02	04	04	05	06	11	40	79

### Findings

The project team had used Balancing Technique to analyse participants' responses to 62 items on a 5 point scale. There were 48 positive statements and 14 negative statements in the chart. The positive statement was given +3 for Strongly Agree, +1 for Agree, 0 for Undecided, -1 for Disagree and -3 for Strongly Disagree reply. Similarly, for a negative statement, it was -3 for Strongly Agree, -1 for Agree, 0 for Undecided, +1 for Disagree and +3 for Strongly Disagree reply. The Undecided item was left untouched and a difference between both sides of Undecided was calculated to decide the trend of opinion balance. The scales used for analysis for both type of items had been as below.

Item Type	Strongly Favourable	Favourable	Uncertain	Adverse	Strongly Adverse
Positive	237 to 80	79 to 01	00	-01 to -79	-80 to -237
Negative	-237 to -80	-79 to -01	00	01 to 79	80 to 237

Item wise results were as below.

S.N.	Statement	Balance Weightage	Result	P/ N *
1	The time fixed for completing the programme is sufficient.	109	Strongly Favourable	P
2	The admission criteria should be relaxed enabling other disadvantaged persons to join this programme.	109	Strongly Favourable	P
3	There should be an Entrance test and Interview for admission to this programme.	36	Adverse	N
4	Audio/Video cassettes should be developed covering some difficult content and supplied to students for more clarity.	142	Strongly Favourable	P
5	The objectives stated at the beginning of the Units/Lessons are achieved after their study.	48	F	P
6	The exercises stated in the units help in understanding the content.	70	F	P
7	The examples stated in the units help in understanding the content.	79	F	P
8	The reference material is made available in the UNISWA Library.	74	F	P
9	The counsellors/tutors deliver lectures on the' topics of their own choice during counselling sessions.	19	F	N
10	The counsellors/tutors/lecturers take every care of student problems and accordingly make their deliberations during contact sessions.	-27	Adverse	P
11	The Academic and Non Academic staff at the Institute of Distance education is Co-operative with the students.	46	F	P

12	Contact sessions are utilised by the students for group discussions and Interaction with the counsellors/ tutors/ lecturers.	33	F	P
13	The publicity regarding admission should be through Heads of school/ Principals of every school apart from the Newspapers, Radio and Television.	80	Strongly Favourable	P
14	The Programme Guide covering the procedure should be supplied by the University to all students.	102	Strongly Favourable	P
15	The content of the books prescribed for the B.A.(Hum) programme is not always clear.	-67	Favourable	N
16	The pattern of the question papers must be changed.	05	Undecided	P
17	The assignment questions do not compel the learner to Memorise, but rather to think over and frame answers by using his own ideas.	58	Favourable	P
18	A model assignment must be circulated by tutors to students.	103	Favourable	P
19	Assignment submission dates for different assignments should not coincide with each other.	115	Strongly Favourable	P
20	The admission criteria must be reviewed to give a chance to all Disadvantaged persons	103	Strongly Favourable	P
21	More Assignment Questions should be given in order to have freedom of choice.	136	Strongly Favourable	P
22	The IDE pays no attention to quality service to students.	10	Favourable	N
23	The fees should be taken in instalments in order to help poor students.	187	Strongly Favourable	P
24	The Final/Term end Examination may not be conducted jointly with the Conventional /regular system students.	-40	Adverse	P
25	A set of questions should be supplied to the students so that they can have an idea of the typology of different questions.	114	Strongly Favourable	P
26	The learning material/books generate much interest towards study.	62	Favourable	P
27	The Institute of Distance Education staff is appropriately skilled to meet any problems.	44	Favourable	P
28	In order to clarify content the Tutors/Lecturers hold discussions with the students.	57	Favourable	P
29	The interaction among learners is practically not possible due to Physical distance and Unwillingness of fellow students to participate.	-33	Favourable	N
30	The Counsellors/Tutors/Lecturers need orientation regarding Course content as well as Methodology to be adopted.	79	Favourable	P
31	The Tutors/Lecturers do not respond, if we contact them before or after the contact sessions.	41	Adverse	N
32	The students and counsellors have an understanding of each other's problems and jointly try to seek a solution for the learners' academic problems.	-14	Adverse	P
33	The students have no freedom to use their own time in performing various activities like study, examination and interaction.	40	Adverse	N
34	The use of audio/video support is almost nil during counselling sessions.	69	Favourable	P
35	Our Tutors provide us individual as well as group guidance also for our queries.	50	Favourable	P

36	The use of email services by tutors & students should be made compulsory for effective academic communication.	101	Strongly Favourable	P
37	The fellow students are interested in interaction for learning from each other.	92	Strongly Favourable	P
38	In general, the IDE Headquarters did not reply to my queries.	47	Adverse	N
39	The counsellors try to avoid all interaction with the students regarding Non-academic queries.	26	Adverse	N
40	The learning material has many pages where content clarity is desired.	31	Favourable	P
41	The IDE staff members are always happy and active in meeting learners' problems.	11	Favourable	P
42	The students don't get the chance to express their views on the content of their choice during contact sessions.	13	Favourable	P
43	We had enjoyed enough flexibility in selecting courses and activities.	35	Adverse	N
44	The B.A. (Hum) programme <i>has</i> helped me in understanding some new concepts in different fields of our study.	110	Strongly Favourable	P
45	The University should develop and provide rating scales to Tutors/ Lecturers for assessing our different activities.	93	Strongly Favourable	P
46	The marking system is a socially accepted system and it helps in seeking a job.	13	Favourable	P
47	The grading system is better than the marking system and the UNISWA should adopt a total grading system.	19	Favourable	P
48	The Internal Evaluation is not done systematically in an un-biased way by Lecturers/ Tutors.	07	Favourable	P
49	Our examinations must be conducted as per students' convenience. (On Demand Examination).	00	Uncertain	P
50	The paper setters and the examiners must be oriented about Evaluation Techniques in Distance Education.	117	Strongly Favourable	P
51	The assignment evaluators do not comment about the positive & negative points in my assignment.	32	Adverse	N
52	Modules should be rewritten because the style of presentation does not correspond to the Self-Instructional Material format.	53	Favourable	P
53	The unit content covers all the objectives stated in the unit introduction.	37	Favourable	P
54	There should be some charts, pictures and explanations to explain the content more clearly.	83	Strongly Favourable	P
55	I feel inferior to my counterparts, who have done a B.A. (Hum) degree as full-time students at University of Swaziland.	90	Strongly Adverse	N
56	The efforts made for writing assignments are of no help in writing answers during the end exam.	83	Strongly Adverse	N
57	The B.A.(Hum) programme requires an overall analysis of different activities to make it at par with the regular B.A.(Hum) programme.	03	Favourable	P
58	The programme has an effect on the future career of students, and so, the students should try to complete it sincerely.	124	Strongly Favourable	P
59	The language and format of the question papers do not clearly indicate how the answers during the final examinations should be written.	-14	Adverse	P

60	Sample assignments are sent to students to demonstrate the writing style of a quality assignment.	68	Adverse	N
61	The project report writing work is not done by supplying a standard Sample project work done by some students in the past.	49	Favourable	P
62	A provision of many supplementary or On Demand Examination should be made to avoid a delay in make-up of a low achievement in some courses.	80	Strongly Favourable	P

**\*Note- P – Positive Statement ; N – Negative Statement;**

## Major Findings

It was concluded after analysis that students' opinion was **strongly favourable** regarding Time fixed for completing the Programme and there seems no need to change the same. They want some relaxations in admission criteria in favour of disadvantaged persons and programme publicity through School principals apart from the Newspapers, Radio and Television. They had strongly desired for development and use of Audio/Video support for more clarity of some difficult content and supplying a 'Programme Guide' covering the procedure/process aspect of the programme as well as circulation of a model assignment among them by the tutors/teachers. Most of them strongly favour that assignments submission dates for different assignments should not coincide with each other. They want more Flexibility and Options in Assignment Questions. The programme fees should be taken in instalments in order to help poor students. They strongly favoured to supply of a set of questions so that they can have an idea of the typology of different questions and using email services by tutors & students as a compulsory tool for effective academic communication.as they expressed strong interest in interaction for learning from each other. They favoured strongly the idea of developing rating scales and providing the same to tutors for assessing different student activities as well as Orientation to the paper setters and the examiners about Evaluation Techniques in Distance Education. They wanted some charts, pictures and explanations to explain the content more clearly. They had opined that this programme has an effect on the future career of students, and so, the students should try to complete it sincerely. They favoured strongly for a provision of many supplementary examination to avoid delay for a make-up.

A **favourable positive opinion** had been found in favour of achieving the Unit Objectives after study of every Unit. They realised the role of Exercises and examples stated with in the Unit. They favoured the availability of the Reference material in UNISWA library. The majority of students' had opined that counsellors/tutors deliver lectures on the topics of their own choice during counselling sessions. They were positive about cooperation of Academic and Nonacademic staff with students at Institute of Distance Education. They were in favour of contact sessions having been utilised by them for group discussions and Interaction with the teachers. There may be in different modules somewhere some confusion which needs more explanation using different techniques.A marginal difference of 05 points though positive may not help in drawing a conclusion either in favour or against an idea of changing the Question paper pattern. Most of the students had found assignment questions do not press for a memory test, but, on their insight. The Institute of Distance Education staff is always happy and active to provide a quality service to them. They are appropriately skilled to meet any problem. Most of them feel that the learning material/books generate much interest towards study. Mostly teachers hold discussions with the students in order to clarify content. The students feel Physical distance and unwillingness among fellow students for the academic interaction was a major hurdle among learners. The academic tutorss need orientation regarding Course content as well as Methodology to be adopted. Use of audio/video support is almost nil during counselling sessions. Tutors provide individual as well as group guidance also to students. The students feel that the learning material has many pages where content clarity is desired. The students don't get a chance to express their views on the content of their choice during contact sessions. They favoured the marking system as a socially accepted system as it helps in seeking a job. It seems that a

large number of students (48) had no idea about the Total Grading system and so were undecided on this issue. The Internal Evaluation is not done systematically in an un-biased way by Tutors. However, a large number of students (50) did not like to render their opinion and were found as undecided. The students were in favour of rewriting the modules as the presentation style does not correspond to the Self-Instructional Material format. They found the unit content as valid as it covers all the objectives stated in the unit. A very small difference of 03 though is favourable, yet very small to draw some conclusion about a delicate issue of an overall analysis of different activities to make it at par with the regular B.A. (Hum) programme. The regular students devote a large amount of time in a face to face situation while, distance learners being in job get a very little time for the same. Therefore, enriching the programme with more activities would burden the students more. They had favoured for availability of a sample project report done by some past student.

There was some **adverse opinion** regarding provision of Entrance test and interview for admission to this programme. The teachers do not take care of students' queries during contact sessions. They want Final/Term end Examination jointly with the Conventional system students. They do not want a separate examination for them. It is wrong to say the The Tutors do not respond if the students contact them before or after the contact sessions. There is no joint effort by teachers and students for meeting learners' problems. The students enjoy much freedom to use their own time in performing various activities like study, examination and interaction. IDE Headquarters replies to students' queries regularly. The teachers do not try to avoid interactions with students regarding non-academic queries. Students had not enjoyed enough flexibility in selecting courses and activities. The assignment evaluators do not comment about the positive & negative points in assignment. Most of the students were happy with the language and format of the question papers. They had not received a sample assignment to demonstrate the writing style of a quality assignment. Also, the students had strong adverse opinion regarding comparison with conventional system graduates. They do not find themselves inferior to the conventional graduates. They had found Assignment writing work as helpful in writing answers during the end examination. There was **uncertainty** about the idea of 'On demand Examination'. It seems that the participants had no clarity of 'On Demand Examination'. This analysis brought some light on the learners' problems faced by them and their solution suggested through opinion expressed in the questionnaire. This has helped the Institute of Distance Education to increase its **Efficiency and Equity** while dealing with distance learners for this programme. Surely if the recommendations are accepted, the programme will meet the quality as it will bridge a gap between perceptions and expectations expressed by the students through Opinion Scale.

## **Conclusion**

This Programme Evaluation based on learner opinion survey revealed that students strongly favoured 18 issues while they had a normal favour for 28 issues. But, they expressed an adverse opinion for 12 issues and a strongly adverse opinion for only 2 issues. They were uncertain about 1 important issue of On Demand Examination as they have perhaps never heard it during their study period. Regarding question paper pattern change, there was a difference of only 5 points and so we may not decide about opinion trend in this item.

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