

UNDERSTANDING COST-EFFECTIVE INFORMATION SOURCES TO PROMOTE THE OUSL: A CASE STUDY ON REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL NETWORK

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Abstract

This Paper identifies Cost Effective Information Sources to Promote the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL). The OUSL is the premier Open Distance Learning institution in Sri Lanka which has the legitimate power to charge a course fee from the students. Therefore, promoting Open Distance Learning to attract students among competitors is also a Challenge for the OUSL. Therefore, it is vital to imply that the most influential information sources should be utilized to publicize information that will enable students to make an informed decision regarding their preferred Higher Education Institution including the OUSL as well. Therefore, the OUSL needs to be market-oriented to face the competitors. The primary data for the study was collected through the Feedback form created by the Regional Educational Service – Quality Assurance Cell. Convenient Sample of respondents taken for the study covering every Regional and Study Centre of the Open University of Sri Lanka. The data analysis was done by using SPSS software. In line with the study's objectives, direct visits to the centers, the OUSL web, and Family and friends are revealed as the most frequently used information sources by the students to reach the OUSL. Newspapers, Viber, and promotional campaigns are rated as the least frequently used information sources to reach the OUSL. This study suggests cutting down budget spending on newspapers as it is the least frequently used and the most expensive source. The results of this study provide an essential platform for the OUSL to decide on investing in those sources of information which are most used and most beneficial for the students. This will allow the Open University of Sri Lanka to reduce costs and improve the quality and effectiveness of the university's activities.

Key words: Cost Effective Promotion, Information Sources, Open Distance Learning, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Promoting Open Distance Learning (ODL) in Sri Lanka is challenging as many Public and Private marketing forces aiming at Higher Education are trying to shape and recreate the educational environment in Sri Lanka. This applies to the OUSL as well. The Open University of Sri Lanka is one of the 17 State Universities in Sri Lanka. Unlike other conventional Universities in Sri Lanka, the OUSL has the legitimate power to charge some percentage of the course fee. The OUSL attracts and registers students by promoting ODL-driven study programs and Courses. This implies that the most influential information sources should be utilized to disseminate information that will enable students to make an informed decision regarding their preferred Higher Education Institution which applies to the OUSL as well (Jager & Pooly, 2010). In such an environment, Information Sources play a vital role in convincing students or interested parties to reach the OUSL. Students need to have sufficient information to reduce the margin of error in their decision. The search for information is necessary for students to decide which degree course is most appropriate for them in terms of their characteristics and so to prevent dropping out (González-Maura, 2009). The choice of University to attend has been characterized as a highly complex decision subject to multiple influences (Briggs & Wilson, 2007). At present the choice of higher educational institutions and courses is more complex and critical for students than in the past. Students are being bombarded with commercial messages promoting educational institutions and courses. On the other hand, information is more widely available, easier to access, and likely to be presented in a manner that will assist prospective students in making informed choices (Jager & Pooly, 2010). By understanding this complexity, the OUSL has introduced several forms of Information Sources to reach the public.

The nature of the Open University lies with the heterogeneous student population and is scattered throughout Sri Lanka due to its mode of delivery of academic activities. Popularly this method is known as "Open Distance Learning (ODL)". Therefore, selection and investing in Specific Information Sources to reach the needs of a heterogeneous population that covers the whole island is again challenging. Although previous researchers have identified some of the most used information sources and the conflicting findings of these studies created a knowledge gap throughout the Literature Review as no study was found related to Understanding the Information Sources in the context of Sri Lanka with particular attention to the open distance learning or the OUSL. Therefore, the fundamental aim of this study is to identify the frequently used Information Sources by students and parents reaching the OUSL and to understand the regional variations and similarities of the Information Sources used by the public to reach the OUSL Courses finally; this Paper attempts to identify and recommend the most Cost-Effective information sources to promote the OUSL further.

Literature Survey

In the past decades, universities have become more marketing focused on the competition to reach their goals (Farr, 2003). As Drummond (2004) emphasized in his study, the expansion and commercialization of higher education have seen a wide-scale adoption of marketing techniques within the sector.

The discussion concerning the marketing of universities began at the time when the first non-public universities were established. At the beginning of the 1980s, the scope of marketing activities was relatively modest (Bialon, 2015). However, not only private universities but even state universities are in this competition in Sri Lanka. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) face increasingly complex challenges today. The main reason behind this challenge is that "their operating environment is undergoing major transformations, such as changing demand patterns, intensifying global competition, and declining in funding. However, the attention of the HEI is to attract many more high-quality students. In this context, "understanding which information sources prospective students resort to when applying to a HEI may greatly enhance HEIs' marketing policies and contribute to effective and focused student recruitment practices" (Jaguar & Pooly,2010).

There are two significant types of information sources, (1) internal and (2) external. Internal sources depend on the consumer's memory. This can be information obtained from previous searches or personal experience and is typically the only source consulted when making routine or low-involvement purchase decisions. External sources entail acquiring information from environmental sources outside the consumers' experience and comprise private and independent sources (Du Plessis & Rossouw, 1998).

However, many students claim to feel uninformed about university courses because often the sources of information that they use (Family, peers, and the internet) are contradictory or contain inaccuracies that they need to know how to resolve (Mayolas & Masferrer, 2010). Palmer (2001:92) refers to this level of search as the internal search based on the student's experience and knowledge. The information gathered depends on the student's need for information and involvement (Menon, Saiti & Socrations, 2007).

Some students need more information and may do their information search at external sources. Kotler (2008) classifies information sources that prospective customers usually use: (a) personal non-marketing controlled, e.g., from friends, Family, and acquaintances, (b) personal marketer controlled, sales representative, (c) Non-personal, non-markets controlled, e.g., mass media, internet, and (d) non-personal market controlled advertisement, prospectus.

Hu and Hossler (2000) provide evidence that the opinions of parents and other family members strongly influence students' consideration of private institutions. When Domino et al. (2006:102) investigated the impact of economic factors on the Selection of colleges, it was found that the household's financial capability, the parents' occupation, the responsibility of paying for studies, and the ethnic group of parents played an important role.

A recent study on university applicants' choice processes identifies four primary information needs of students: course and entrance requirements, reputation, location, and a range of financial considerations (Brown et al., 2009).

Enache (2011) argues that a website is an excellent source of where students start to search for information about HE institutions. Evans (1995) believes that a significant source of information influencing choice is the

institution's staff through direct phone calls, mail, etc. Along the same lines, Fondevila-Gascón, Del Olmo, and Sierra (2012) suggested the possibility that using social networks would overtake university websites. A more recent study by Morgan and Baron (2003) found that prospectuses were the most important source of information due to pre-university students being from a new generation that uses social networks and forums more than other, more traditional sources such as university prospectuses, for example (Flores-Vivar, 2009). Institutions that spent considerable sums in advertisements and promotional activities to lure students to their institutions were condemned. Several other literature sources also seemed to disagree on the importance of the information sources consulted by prospective students (Jaguar,2010).

Although previous research have identified some of the most used information sources and the conflicting findings of these studies it has created a knowledge gap and an evidence gap throughout the Literature Review, as no study was found related to Understanding the Information Sources in the context of ODL arena.

Methodology

Primary Data were collected through a structured Feedback Form Created by the Regional Educational Services (RES) Quality Assurance Cell. The study used a Quantitative Research approach to verify and evaluate the objectives. The objectives of the research are as follows.

- To identify the frequently used Information Sources to reach the OUSL.
- To Identify the Regional Variations and Similarities in Selecting Information Sources to Reach the OUSL.
- To identify Cost-Effective Information Sources to Promote the OUSL Courses across the Country.

The target group of this study was the students and information seekers who visited the OUSL, Regional (09), and Study (18) Centres from 2022.09.17-2022.10.17, covering every district in Sri Lanka. Convenience sampling ensures that the targeted population is accessible and available. A structured feedback form created by RES QA Cell was taken to gather data on information sources deciding to reach the OUSL. The feedback form consisted of three categories. In the first section, the biographical information of the students/ information seekers was obtained. In the second section, the information source they used to reach the OUSL was evaluated, and the final section evaluated the satisfaction of the services. However, the information sources category was considered for this study. The gathered data were analyzed by using the SPSS version 19.0 statistical package. Initially, data were sorted into ten categories of information sources which have been identified by the QA Cell of the RES and then they were divided into provinces and districts. A ranking criterion was created using the received data in general and provincial wise for analysis.

Results and Discussion

Selection of a higher education institute is a challenging decision for students. In addition, the choice is more challenging if it is a paid education, especially in a country where free education is available. Choosing a degree course is a complicated decision for students. Often, they do not have sufficient information to opt for a specific course (Cano, 2008), which might result in a less-than-successful choice (Font-Mayolas & Masferrer, 2010). There, the availability of accessible information significantly influences the students.

Descriptive statistics shown in Table 1 clearly show the frequently used information sources to reach the OUSL by the respondents. The results demonstrate that direct visits to the centres are the most frequently used information sources to reach the OUSL. In the ranking order of the information sources, the second best source is the OUSL website, and the third most important source is family and friends. Facebook, WhatsApp, and other sources respectively rank after that. Interestingly newspapers, promotional campaigns and Viber were the least frequently used information sources to reach the OUSL.

Table1: Ranking Order of the Information Sources to reach the OUSL

Rank	Information Sources
1	Direct visits to the Centres (33.14%)
2	OUSL website (18.44%)
3	Family/ Friends (14.86%)
4	Facebook (10.47%)
5	WhatsApp (9.55%)
6	Other sources (7.44%)
7	YouTube (3.49%)
8	Promotional campaign (2.02%)
9	Newspapers (0.50%)
10	Viber (0.09%)

Table 2 Clearly shows the regional disparity in terms of the information sources used by the students to reach the OUSL.

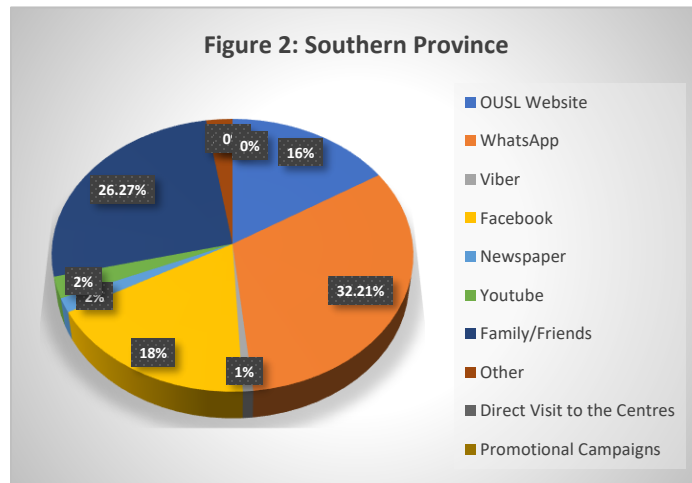
Table 2: Provincial Ranking Order of Information Sources to reach the OUSL

Rank	North Central Province	Uva Province	Eastern Province	Western Province	North Province	Central Province	Southern Province	Sabaragamuwa Province	North Western Province
1	Direct visit to the Centre (34.33%)	Family/ Friends (47.59%)	Direct visit to the Centre (38.01%)	Direct visit to the Centre (38.83%)	Direct visit to the Centre (27.38%)	Direct visit to the Centre (31.91%)	WhatsApp (32.21%)	Direct visit to the Centre (79.54%)	Family/ Friends (45.61%)
2	Family/ Friends (33.67%)	Direct visit to the Centre (29.52%)	WhatsApp (19.37%)	OUSL Website (25.33%)	Facebook (20.54%)	OUSL Website (29.30%)	Family/ Friends (26.27%)	WhatsApp / OUSL Website/ OUSL Website (3.61%)	WhatsApp (19.30%)
3	OUSL Website (10.67%)	Facebook (4.82%)	Facebook (17.53%)	Other sources (14.57%)	WhatsApp (17.83%)	Facebook (12.38%)	Facebook (17.80%)	You Tube (3.01%)	OUSL Website (17.11%)
4	Whatsapp (7.33%)	WhatsApp (5.12%)	Family/ Friends (7.93%)	Family/ Friends (8.69%)	OUSL Website (15.13%)	Other sources (8.22%)	OUSL Website (16.10%)	Facebook (2.41%)	Facebook (12.72%)
5	Facebook (3.67%)	OUSL Website (4.52%)	YouTube (8.12%)	Facebook (3.64%)	Family/ Friends (9.24%)	Family/ Friends (6.87%)	YouTube / Other Sources (2.54%)	Promotional Campaigns (1.20%)	YouTube/ Other Sources (2.63%)
6	Youtube (3.62%)	Other sources (3.92%)	OUSL Website (4.61%)	YouTube (3.64%)	Promotional campaign (4.30%)	WhatsApp (4.55%)	News papers (1.69%)	Other Sources (1.81%)	Direct Visit to the Centre/ Promotion Campaigns/ News papers/ Viber (0.00%)
7	Promotional campaign (3.33%)	Promotional Campaign (3.61%)	Other sources (4.06%)	WhatsApp (3.64%)	Other sources (3.98%)	YouTube (3.58%)	Promotional Campaigns/ Direct visit to the Centre and Viber (0.00%)	News Papers (1.20%)	
8	Other sources (2.00%)	You Tube (0.90%)	Promotional Campaigns (0.37%)	Promotional Campaigns (1.08%)	YouTube (0.96%)	Promotional campaign (2.51%)		Viber (0.00%)	
9	News papers (1.33%)	Viber/News papers (0.00%)	News papers/ Viber (0.00%)	News papers (0.58%)	Viber (0.48%)	News papers (0.68%)			
10	Viber (0.00%)			Viber (0.00%)	News papers (0.16%)	Viber (0.00%)			

The study revealed that in the North Central province, a direct visit to the centre is rated the highest (34.33 %) among all the sources, and the 2nd highest (33.67%) was the friends/family. OUSL website is the 3rd most popular source in the North Central province, and the least popular source of information is the Newspapers and Viber.

In the Uva Province (Figure 1), the data showed that Family and Friends is the highest (47.59 %) ranked information source used to reach the OUSL, and the second highest value (29.52 %) was assigned to the direct visit to the Centre. Facebook is rated the 3rd most popular source in the Uva province, and the least popular sources of information are Viber messages and Newspapers.

Direct visits to the centre rated the highest (38.01%) among the sources in the Eastern province, and social media like WhatsApp (19.37%) and Facebook (17.53%) were the 2nd highest, and friends and family were the third highest information sources in the Eastern Province. Among all the provinces, the eastern province rated the highest who have chosen YouTube (8.12%) as an information source to reach the OUSL. Like the Eastern Province, Northern Province also rated direct visits to the centres (27.38%) and social media as the frequently used information sources to reach the OUSL. However, unlike the eastern province, the OUSL website rated the fourth highest source in Northern Province.

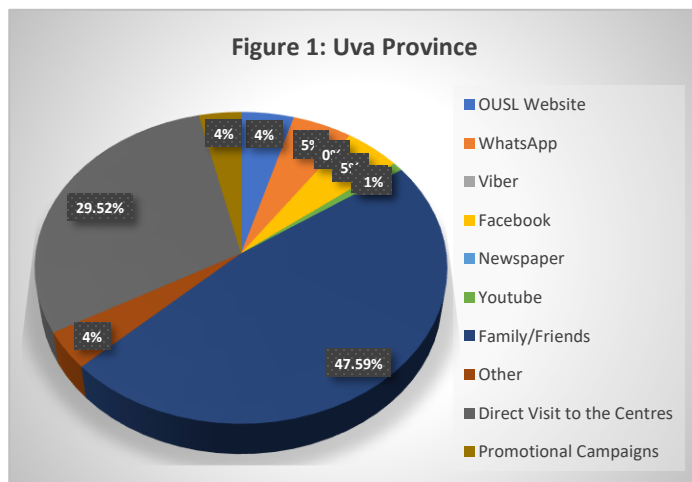


Like the North Central, Eastern, and Northern Provinces, Direct visits (31.27%) to the centres gained the top rank among information sources in the Central province, and the OUSL website (29.30%) was the 2nd highest. This is common to the Western province as well.

Interestingly, Southern Province (Figure 2) representation of the sources of information used as indicated is WhatsApp (32.21%), and Family/ Friends (26.27%) is the highest obtained value. Facebook is the most popular method in the district, and Viber is the least popular source of information.

It was highlighted in the study that the southern province is the only province that has yet to identify direct visits to the centre as a frequently used information source.

It was revealed that parallel to the Uva province, family and friends (45.67%) rated as the frequently used information source to reach the OUSL. In the Northwestern Province (Figure 3), WhatsApp (19.30%) is rated the 2nd highest.



Especially, direct visits to the centre were not identified as an information source to reach the OUSL in Northwestern province. In the Sabaragamuwa Province, the most common method of use is direct visits to district office (79.54%). According to the results, all other methods are the least popular in the province.

It was evident that except for Uva, Southern, and Northwestern Provinces, all other Provinces use direct visits to the centres to reach information on OUSL courses. Interestingly Uva and Northwestern Provinces use family and friends to reach the OUSL. The southern province

is the only province that uses WhatsApp as the most frequently used information source to reach the OUSL courses.

Further, it was evident that OUSL Website plays a vital role in most provinces. Especially in Western, Central, Sabaragamuwa, North Central, and Northwestern Provinces, the OUSL website has been chosen as the second or third highest information source the students use to reach the OUSL courses. Therefore, the University should

ensure that they design intuitive and informative websites about the different services and amenities new students will find on offer.

This study also shows that the students used family and friends to reach the OUSL. Northcentral, Uva, Southern, and Northwestern provinces marked family and friends as top-rated information sources of their provinces. The results of this study also indicate that the Family and the internet are not only the most used sources of information but also the most valuable according to the students (Flores-Vivar, 2009). Social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook and other sources such as promotion letters, banners, and leaflet distributions were marked as essential sources in every province.

Interestingly, newspapers, viber, and promotional campaigns are the region's least frequently used information sources.

Conclusion and Implications

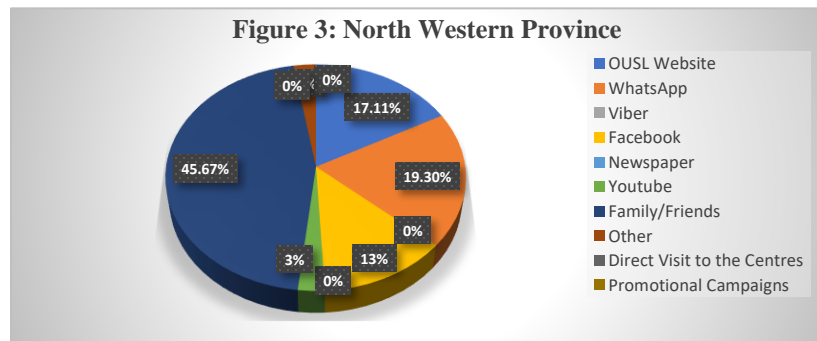
This study aims to understand cost-effective information sources to promote the OUSL among Sri Lankan students. In this study, it was evident that direct visits to the centre as the most frequently used information source. This study suggests that strengthening Public Information Divisions (PID) or the public information desks available in the Open University Regional and Study Centres should be further strengthened by increasing human and physical resources. Upgrading the existing information divisions of the RES by setting up eye-catching and spacious lobbies, and training the staff with special attention to telephone etiquette, customer relations, and marketing are some of the suggestions that this study is revealed. In addition, the availability of information, such as leaflets, brochures, and telephone operators, is essential to promote the OUSL through the PID of the Centres.

The second rated information source used to access the OUSL was the OUSL website. In their study, Jan & Ammari (2016) emphasized that the websites of higher education institutions positively affect students' decision-making, and significantly influence their choice of a specific university. The website should develop to cater to the needs of the students and parents who are seeking information. This study suggests upgrading the OUSL Website by adding a robotic automated inquiry solution system and a user-friendly environment, noticeable contents, attractive colour themes, and graphics to enhance the usage of the OUSL website are important to promote the university. Further, this study suggests adding language preferences to accommodate the requirements of different information seekers is too essential in attracting students to the university.

Family and Friends were rated as the third information source students selected to reach the OUSL. Therefore, the service given to the current students should focus on spreading the word as one effective way of Promotion. This is probably due to the critical outcome determining the decision-makers' future careers. According to research by Lehmann (2017), traditional forms of communication such as word-of-mouth, college websites, college planning/ranking websites, online reviews/comments, campus tours, and college e-mail are more influential than social media in influencing students' college selection decisions. According to Lehmann (2017), traditional word-of-mouth influences enrollment decisions more than online word-of-mouth among students. This study also revealed that traditional word spread was a highly reliable source that students use to reach the OUSL than social media. It does not suggest that social media is not effective in promotions in this study.

Apart from the above sources, social media like WhatsApp and Facebook are also revealed as essential

sources of information students use to reach the OUSL. It was evident that only in the southern province, WhatsApp rated the top among information sources. WhatsApp is not a social network, but it can generate numerous social connections through group chats. It can be used on both mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) and personal. This application provides several free and enjoyable communication resources, such as



sending texts, photos, audio, videos, and, recently, the option to make connections. Paladin (2018) analyzed the standard social media networks utilized by the top 25 universities and colleges in Africa and Asia and found that the top higher education institutions in Asia and Africa use famous social media platforms. According to the study, using social media networks for colleges and universities aims to promote their undergraduate and postgraduate programs and provide information about all scientific events and others. Researchers noticed that the quality of the relationship between the university and students is high in the case of students following the university on social media platforms (Clark, Fine, and Scheuer, 2017). Therefore, this study suggests that it is cost-effective to streamline the social media promotions done by the university to strengthen the network of followers across Sri Lanka. Universities must develop mechanisms with which they can trace the effectiveness of social media in terms of feedback, such as questions for clarification, which customers ask.

Interestingly, the costliest News Paper advertisements and Viber were rated as the least frequently used information sources to reach the OUSL. Therefore, this study suggests cutting the university's expenses on Newspapers.

However, although promotional campaigns are rated as the least frequently used among the information sources used to reach the OUSL, this study suggests organizing promotional campaigns thrice a year. After GCE Ordinary Levels, after Advanced Levels, and end of each year to attract more students. The PID should organize these promotional campaigns centrally and come to the Regional/Study Centers at the implementation level. Promotions for such programs also should be conducted nationally to reach every part of Sri Lanka. Most importantly, the students' experience and knowledge from such campaigns should be the same despite the location. In such a mechanism, the promotional campaigns will be cost-effective in the future.

The results of this study provide essential information for the OUSL to decide on investing in those sources of information which are most used and will be most beneficial for the students in planning their higher education goals. The study findings will allow the Open University of Sri Lanka to reduce costs and improve the quality and effectiveness of its activities by investing in useful information sources in the future.

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