# FACULTY SATISFACTION IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A CARIBBEAN UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE

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## Introduction

The Sloan Consortium (2002) regards faculty satisfaction as a "critical building block of quality in online education and stresses its effects on faculty motivation and its importance to enhancing students' learning experiences". Moreover, Sherron (1998) is of the opinion that "the ultimate success or failure of the distance education enterprise is inextricably tied to the enthusiasm and continued support of the faculty" (p.44). Of note also, is that "most of the emerging empirical research on Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALNs) has focused on students, but the assessment of faculty roles and characteristics that influence their satisfaction with ALNs has received limited empirical attention" (Hiltz, Kim & Shea, 2007, p.2). This research, therefore sought to investigate factors which contribute to faculty satisfaction and promote rich learning environments and high quality teaching experiences. In contrast, factors related to faculty dissatisfaction were also explored. The five factors: student, personal, institutional, administrative and technological were investigated with the view of promoting efficient and effective planning and decision making of administrators and policy makers.

Cognizant of the various forms of online environments and faculty structures in various universities, there is particular need to define online teaching and learning as they relate to this research. To this end, the term Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALN) has been adopted as purported by Hiltz et al. (2007). This comprises Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) systems that allow "anytime" communication via the Internet, using software platforms such as course management systems, computerized conferencing, or bulletin boards that support threaded discussions (p.1). Additionally, the "Learning Networks" aspect "refers to the social network or community of learners that emerges when students and faculty communicate and work together to build and share knowledge" (ibid, p.1).

In terms of faculty, The University of the West Indies (UWI) Open Campus is unique in comparison to its three sister campuses, since it does not employ full time faculty but contracts 'adjunct faculty' such as lecturers and qualified content experts from the other UWI campuses, external campuses (regional and international) and private and public organizations. There are presently three categories of adjunct faculty responsible for the teaching of online courses: E-Tutors, Course Coordinators and Group Facilitators. The

E-Tutors are the course instructors while the Course Coordinators supervise the work of the E-Tutors and lend assistance with instruction when necessary. The term Group Facilitator is a relatively new title and such persons may perform the role of either Course Coordinator or E-Tutor.

With regard to faculty satisfaction, Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) are of the opinion that it is a "complex issue that is difficult to describe and predict but defines it as "faculty's perception that teaching in the online environment is effective and professionally beneficial" (p.105). For the purposes of this study, faculty satisfaction is defined as the extent to which faculty perceive student, personal, institutional, administrative and technology factors as effective.

## Significance of the Study

The importance of investigating faculty satisfaction cannot be underestimated since it is one of the integral components of quality online education. Further, faculty satisfaction can influence student success and satisfaction, faculty involvement and retention and programme development and quality. Moreover, a clear understanding of the factors which promote faculty satisfaction can enable administrators and policy makers to retain adjunct faculty, contribute to quality programs and enhance the reputation of their institutions (Palmer, 2011, p.18-20).

## Purpose of the Study

Mindful of the importance of faculty satisfaction to the online teaching and learning environment, the purpose of this study is to determine the overall level of faculty satisfaction, and identify factors contributing to and hindering their satisfaction. The study is not only important but also timely since "there have been a relatively small number of prior empirical studies of faculty satisfaction with teaching" (Hiltz, Kim & Shea, 2007, p.3). The study is therefore guided by the following research questions:

- What is the overall satisfaction level of adjunct faculty?
- Which factors most contribute to the satisfaction of adjunct faculty members?
- Which factors least contribute to the satisfaction of adjunct faculty members?
- What differences exist in the satisfaction levels of adjunct faculty by age, sex and job title?
- How can UWI Open Campus improve the online delivery process?

## The Context of the Research

The University of the West Indies (UWI) first introduced distance education (DE) in 1983 with the establishment of the University of the West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment (UWIDITE) via its audio teleconferencing system. Through UWIDITE, tertiary education and training became more accessible, especially to the citizenry of the Eastern Caribbean. Improvements continued and on August 1, 1996, the amalgamation of the Distance Education Unit, Challenge, and UWIDITE was completed, giving rise to the Distance Education Centre

(DEC). A further amalgamation was completed in 2008, resulting in the birth of the UWI Open Campus (UWIOC), which provides fully online, blended and face to face programmes to primarily meet the needs of the underserved and underprivileged in the Eastern Caribbean.

The UWIOC is the fourth and newest of the UWI campuses. The other three campuses are located in Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and Jamaica. The UWI Open Campus was primarily established to provide tertiary education to the non-campus Caribbean countries. Unlike the other three campuses, the UWIOC primarily provides online education so that students can remain in their countries and access quality tertiary education. In addition to its online facilities, the UWIOC comprises thirty-three country sites (the former Schools of Continuing Studies). These country sites provide asynchronous and synchronous online support as well as face-to-face support for students. Face-to-face support from country site personnel also include areas such as registration, academic advice, and where needed, face-to-face tutoring. At these sites, there is also access to resources such as tele- and video-conferencing facilities, computer labs and libraries.

Online support at the UWIOC is facilitated by a team of online personnel which consists of Programme Managers, Course Coordinators, Learning Support Specialists and E-Tutors. Online services also include academic advising as well as access to virtual library resources. Course tutors, apart from their initial training, also receive support from the Instructional Development Coordinator as well as all the other above mentioned personnel. It is in this context that the current study was conducted.

## Literature Review

The literature is replete with factors which contribute to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. These include but are not limited to age, gender, student peer interaction, student instruction interaction, course content, technology and remuneration. Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) further categorized these factors into three groups: student related, instructor related and institution related (p.106). For the purpose of this research, however, student, personal, institutional, administrative and technology factors are explored.

### *Student factors influential to faculty satisfaction*

Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) in their study of 102 distance education faculty noted that "student satisfaction is an important element in the investigation of faculty satisfaction" (p.105). Further, the research of Belcheir and Cucek (2002), in their study of 254 postsecondary distance education faculty, suggested that increased student interaction is positively correlated with faculty satisfaction (Palmer, 2011, p.47). Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) also report that researchers (Fredericksen et al., 2000; Hartman et al., 2000) have established a positive correlation between faculty satisfaction and student performance (p.106). In this study, the student factors investigated include student participation in their learning, student-student and student-faculty interaction, and student technological skills.

### Personal factors influential to faculty satisfaction

For the purpose of this research, personal factors refer to the faculty's level of competence in technology, their level of creativity in the use of online resources, interaction with and response to students' individual skills gained from training and their perception of teaching online versus face to face. Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) state that "faculty satisfaction is positively influenced when faculty believe that they can promote positive student outcomes" (p.106). If faculty perceives that they are competent in their use of technology, sufficiently creative in their use of online resources, proficient due to acquired training, comfortable with their level of student interaction and favour online teaching, it is likely that they will be satisfied in their role.

### Institutional factors influential to faculty satisfaction

Faculty satisfaction is generally high when the institution values online teaching and has policies in place that support the faculty. Palmer (2011) cites Oomen-Early and Murphy (2009) who contend that "external variables external to the instructor that are mediated by the educational organization can interfere with, and potentially dissuade many instructors from distance education program" (p.49). In this regard, Palmer (2011) refers to a number of institutional/organizational factors which have been found to be influential to faculty satisfaction. These include workload, training, and adequate course preparation time. Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) also refer to institution-related factors such as workload, adequate compensation and an equitable reward system and the quality of courses (p.106). This study investigated the institutional factors purported in the literature but also included the institution's assessment practices; access to quality teaching resources; student load and faculty inclusion in decision making. Further, Satterlee (2008) quotes Bower (2001) who asserts that "among potential online adjuncts, there is some trepidation as to the adequacy of institutional support" (p.23).

### Administrative factors influential to faculty satisfaction

Administrative factors which are closely related to institutional factors were separated to provide the institution with specific evidence pertaining to general administrative support and the response time of Programme Managers, Programme Course Delivery Assistants, and Learning Support Specialists. Satterlee (2008) cites Hagedorn (2000) who states that "there are facets of a job that lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction that are under the control of university administrators" (p.9). When an adjunct is not physically present on a campus, the support provided by colleagues, administration and staff is important. Satterlee (2008) holds the view expressed by Visser, Smets, Oort, and Hanneke (2003) and Freeborn (2001) "that an employee's perception that they are well managed and well resourced will lead to job satisfaction" (p.23).

### Technology factors influential to faculty satisfaction

When faculty experience technology difficulties or do not have access to adequate technology and tools, their satisfaction is likely to decrease (Bolliger &Wasilik, 2009, p.106). Apart from the course curriculum, there must be a robust technological infrastructure to support, facilitate and enhance quality online delivery. This view is further emphasized by the Sloan Consortium (2002), which is of the view that the satisfaction of faculty is maintained and enhanced when provided with adequate institutional support and a well-maintained technical infrastructure.

## Methodology

### Data Collection Instrument

A forty-six (46) item online survey of faculty satisfaction with online course delivery was developed and administered via Survey Monkey to collect data on demographics (*online position, sex, age range, online teaching experience, title of course taught, and affiliate UWI campus or other job title*) and perceptions of faculty satisfaction based on institutional factors (11 items); student factors (5 items); technology factors (6 items); personal factors (10 items); and administrative factors (4 items). The survey also comprised one open-ended item: *How can UWI Open Campus improve the online delivery process?* The survey was designed based on the constructs derived from the literature and scale items were compared to other instruments published in the literature. The data were collected on a 5-point Likert scale: Very Satisfied (5); Satisfied (4); Moderately Satisfied (3) Dissatisfied (2); and Very Dissatisfied (1).

### Sample

The subjects were a convenience sample of E-tutors, Course Coordinators and Group Facilitators who were contracted during Semester 2 of the 2012-13 academic year and those who had been previously contracted within the past three years. Of the 345 faculty members who received surveys, 249 responded, hence a response rate of 72% was achieved. Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of the sample.

Table 1:  The characteristics of participants

| GENDER (n = 249) | Total | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 51 | 20.5 |
| Female | 198 | 79.5 |
| **AGE RANGE (n = 249)** | **Total** | **Percentage** |
| Under 25 years | 3 | 1.2 |
| 26-35 years | 74 | 29.7 |
| 36-45 years | 60 | 24.1 |
| 46-55 years | 74 | 29.7 |
| 56-65 years | 33 | 13.3 |
| Over 65 years | 5 | 2.0 |
| **JOB TITLE (n = 249)** | **Total** | **Percentage** |
| E-Tutors | 163 | 65.5 |
| Course Coordinators | 70 | 28.1 |
| Group Facilitator | 16 | 6.4 |
| **ONLINE TEACHING EXPERIENCE(n =245)** | **Total** | **Percentage** |
| 0-1 year | 70 | 28.6 |
| 2-5 years | 94 | 38.4 |
| 6-10 years | 72 | 29.4 |
| 11-15 years | 8 | 3.3 |
| 16-20 years | 1 | 0.4 |

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, mean scores and percentages were used primarily to analyse the research questions. Further, thematic coding was applied to the participants' open-ended responses to ascertain their level of satisfaction pertaining to the factors investigated.

## Findings

### Question 1: What is the overall satisfaction level of adjunct faculty?

Participants were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction as it relates to their overall teaching experience. The survey findings as illustrated in Table 2 revealed that faculty was generally satisfied with their online teaching experience as demonstrated by an overall mean score of 4.05, from a maximum of 5.00. Male faculty were slightly more satisfied (4.12) than their female counterparts (4.03).

Table 2:  Faculty overall satisfaction by gender

| Overall teaching experience | Gender | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male (n=50) | | Female (n=196) | |
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| | 4.12 | 0.746 | 4.03 | 0.686 |

## Question 2: Which factors most contribute to the satisfaction of adjunct faculty online delivery experiences?

Table 3: Faculty's satisfaction levels with the five components

| Factors of Faculty Satisfaction | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Personal Factors | 239 | 3.09 | 0.732 |
| Student Factors | 238 | 3.07 | 0.861 |
| Administrative Factors | 241 | 4.18 | 0.756 |
| Technology Factors | 243 | 4.07 | 0.781 |
| Institutional Factors | 241 | 3.71 | 0.802 |
| Overall | 249 | 3.62 | 0.786 |

Based on Table 3, faculty was most satisfied with administrative factors with a mean score of 4.18. This indicates that faculty was very satisfied with the response times of Programme Mangers, Course Delivery Assistants, Learning Support Specialists and the general administrative support in the online environment. Based on the calculated percentages for the Likert scale responses (Very satisfied and Satisfied), faculty was most satisfied with the response times of Programme Course Delivery Assistants (90.4%) and Programme Managers (90%). The percentage levels of satisfaction for the Learning Support Specialists and general administrative support in the online environment were also high with percentages of 85.6% and 82.8% respectively. Of note also is the mean score of 4.07 for technology factors. For this subscale all six items registered satisfaction levels above 75%. The item with the highest level of satisfaction (90.2%) was '*the ease of access to my online courses*' [Very satisfied 44.5%, Satisfied, 54.7%].

## Question 3: Which factors inhibit the satisfaction adjunct faculty online delivery experiences?

On the contrary, faculty was least satisfied with student factors with an overall mean score of 3.07. The item: '*students' participation in online discussions*' recorded the lowest percentage score of 26.3%; [Very satisfied 4.2%, Satisfied, 22.1%]. By comparison, the items with the highest percentage score: '*the level of student-faculty interaction*' was 45.7%.

## Question 4: What differences exist in the satisfaction level of faculty by age, sex and job title?

Table 4:   Mean Scores for the Faculty's Levels of Satisfaction with the Five Satisfaction factors by
        AGE RANGE

| Factors of Faculty Satisfaction | AGE RANGE | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Under 25 (n=3) | | 26-35 years (n=70) | | 36-45 years (n=58) | | 46-55 years (n=70) | | 56-65 years (n=29) | | Over 65 years (n=4) | |
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| Personal | 3.74 | 0.713 | 3.94 | 0.742 | 3.98 | 0.784 | 4.01 | 0.658 | 3.98 | 0.732 | 4.07 | 0.674 |
| Student | 3.00 | 0.662 | 2.87 | 0.910 | 3.14 | 0.847 | 3.20 | 0.744 | 3.17 | 0.887 | 2.90 | 1.282 |
| Administrative | 4.42 | 0.577 | 4.05 | 0.666 | 4.14 | 0.888 | 4.25 | 0.712 | 4.32 | 0.783 | 4.44 | 0.672 |
| Technology | 4.44 | 0.481 | 3.95 | 0.805 | 4.08 | 0.780 | 4.13 | 0.703 | 4.18 | 0.811 | 3.92 | 1.36 |
| Institutional | 3.99 | 0.843 | 3.54 | 0.759 | 3.64 | 0.794 | 3.68 | 0.775 | 3.73 | 0.854 | 4.09 | 0.821 |
| Overall | 3.92 | 0.655 | 3.67 | 0.776 | 3.79 | 0.819 | 3.85 | 0.718 | 3.88 | 0.813 | 3.88 | 0.962 |

Generally, the satisfaction levels across age ranges were relatively stable ranging from mean scores of 3.67 (26-35years) to 3.92 (under 25's). For individual factors, the under 25 age-range scored the highest mean scores of 4.44 and 4.42 for technology and administrative factors respectively. Of note also, is that all age ranges were least satisfied with student factors. Scores ranged from 2.87 (26-35 age range) to 3.20 (46-55 age-range). With regard to gender, the overall mean score of 3.69 was recorded for both male and female participants. Similarly, the overall mean score of 3.77 was consistent for E-Tutors, Course Coordinators and Group Facilitators.

### Question 5: How can UWI Open Campus improve the online delivery process?

Faculty suggested a number of ways to improve online delivery. These include a salary increase for faculty; introduction of more flexible training schedules; the institution of more consistent practices in course delivery and timely handover of course content. Faculty further suggested a decrease in faculty- student ratio; improvement in student participation; introduction of measures to ensure student readiness and improve student technology competencies; the creation of a more user-friendly Learning Exchange; and improvement of technology support, especially to new faculty members.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that online education is fast becoming an integral component of higher education. This reality is very much evident in the Caribbean and more specifically at the UWI Open Campus. In this regard, it is imperative that the issue of quality is not compromised and that students receive the best possible online experiences. Hence, the satisfaction of faculty is important since they play such a pivotal role in ensuring and maintaining the delivery of quality online education. Hence, this study investigated the satisfaction level of adjunct faculty based on their overall online teaching experiences and personal, institutional; technological, institutional and administrative factors. The findings revealed the following:

- Faculty were relatively satisfied with their online teaching experiences, with mean scores (maximum of 5.0) of 4.12 for male faculty and 4.03 for their female counterparts.
- Faculty was most satisfied with administrative factors (4.18) and least satisfied with student factors (3.07).
- There were minimal differences in regard to satisfaction levels of faculty by age, sex and job title.

Additionally, faculty made plausible suggestions for the improvement of online delivery. Inclusive but not exhaustive, were recommendations to increase faculty remuneration; introduce more flexible training schedules; institute more consistent practices in course delivery and timely handover of course content. Further suggestions were to decrease faculty-student ratio; improve student participation; introduce measures to ensure student readiness; implement measures to improve student technology competencies; create a more user-friendly Learning Exchange; and improve technology support, especially to new faculty members.

These recommendations are in keeping with the extant literature and should prove helpful to administrators and policy makers. As noted by Bolliger and Wasilik (2009), "faculty satisfaction … is important and needs to be continuously assessed to assure quality online educational experiences for faculty and students" (p.114).

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