1997/98 BCIT Distance Education Survey Executive Summary

One student's suggestion,"Increase tutor support beyond the designated time frame to call in E-Mail would be a great way to do this."

BritishColumbia Institute of Technology

Introduction

The 1997/98 BCIT Distance Education Survey was administered by mail to 4511 students who had registered for at least one course during the 199620, 199630 and 199710 terms. The final adjusted response rate, after conducting two mail-outs was 39% (enough data to reliably present results at the program area level). The Distance Education Task Force, who administer BCIT distance education, commissioned this survey in order to explore the particular needs of distance education students in support of distance education course planning.

The 1997/98 survey was based on the 1995/96 survey, however important new questions were included in the 1997/98 survey, mainly in the area of preferences for alternate forms of course delivery, and computer and web access.

Variation in the program area results is seen in much of the survey. Those further interested in program area information should consult this report's base data tables. This summary outlines the major overall results of the 1997/98 survey and presents comparisons to the 1995/96 survey where valid.

Student Characteristics

The percentage of those who had registered for one course only, over the three terms was about the same as it was in the 1995/96 survey (36%). However, there was a slight increase in the number of students taking courses at other institutions (41% in the 1997/98 survey, as opposed to 37% in the 1995/96 survey).

Although not conclusive because of different options across both surveys, a lower proportion of students reported using a BCIT publication as the initial information source regarding BCIT Distance Education courses. Nearly a quarter, 22% of all students obtained their initial source of information from their employer.

While previous educational credentials remained stable, students' aspirations for future credentials increased in terms of the credential level for each program area with the exception of Vocational programs.

A shift in the age of the cohort was noticed as the distribution of ages was notably older. Survey data indicated that the younger sub-group (20-29 years), which accounted for 20% of survey respondents, were more apt to use a computer and access the web, on a regular basis. The distribution of students' location is presented in the below figure:

Location Distribution by Program Area (of Cohort)

| Location	PROGRAM AREA					
	Business	Engineering	Vocational	Health	Math	Total
Lower Mainland	95.0%	34.0%	59.9%	52.8%	71.6%	58.1%
Other BC	4.0%	53.5%	38.7%	27.8%	22.5%	30.3%
Other Province (& International)	1.3%	12.5%	1.4%	19.5%	5.9%	11.7%
Total	100.0% 472	100.0% 497	100.9% 639	100.0% 1488	100.0% 102	100.0% 3198

Course Registration

The proportion of students within each program using the phone to register for distance education courses has increased substantially since the 1995/96 survey (52% vs 41%), while mail registration has gone down (20% vs 25%). In terms of who pays for the course; a slight shift towards the employer carrying more of the financial burden was noticeable. 31% of students enroled in distance education courses were assisted by their employer in helping to pay for course fees

Service Level Ratings

The overall percentage of students who agreed the assignment turn-around time was reasonable remained stable over the two surveys (1997/98: 71%).

There was a slight improvement in the rating of availability of course advice prior to enroling. In the 1997/98 survey, 66% agreed that it was reasonable, while in the 1995/96 survey 61% agreed:
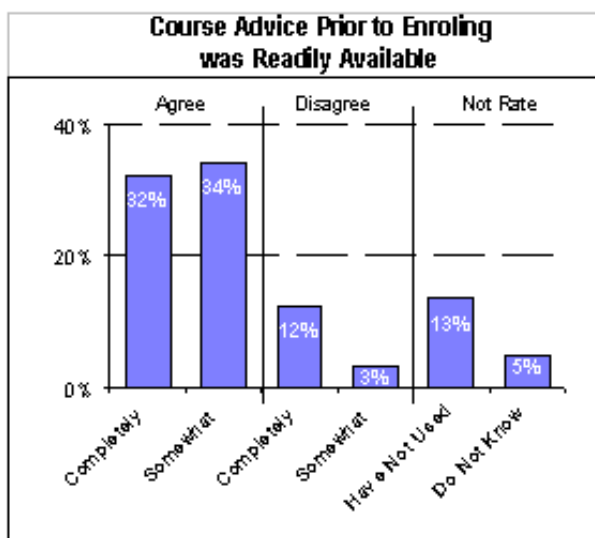
The other question on the 1997/98 survey regarding advising was rating the availability of program advising. Overall, 61% agreed it was readily available.

In terms of rating telephone access to registration, there was no shift between the two surveys. In the 1997/98 survey, 68% agreed that telephone access for course information was reasonable, while for the 1995/96 survey, 70% agreed that telephone access for registration was reasonable.

Preferences vs Usage

Virtually all students (97%) have used printed materials for their distance education

course-work and also, over nine in ten would prefer to utilize it for their course-work (94%).

On the use of newer technologies such as the web, although only 16% of respondents have utilized it previously in their course work, 54% of respondents reported that they would "definitely" or "somewhat" prefer to use it. This result is closely correlated with the means to use these resources. Over eight in ten respondents (84%) who would prefer to use these resources also had the access to, and could use the Web on a regular basis

Course Information

In terms of market awareness, 19% reported that they could have taken their course elsewhere. Of all those who actually took their course, 17% of all students had not completed it (withdrew). The most common cited reason for not completing the course was the lack of time (often cited were work reasons, or motivational reasons).

Student Motivation

Almost a quarter, 24% of students reported that the self-paced nature of distance education was the primary reason why they enroled in distance education course-work. The main reported reason for taking courses in a distance education format was that their schedule did not allow them to attend regular classes. For the 1995/96 survey, although the options were different, only 15% chose the distance education format because of the self-paced nature of the course work. From the 1997/98 survey, convenience was the primary factor for another 33% of respondents enroling in this format.
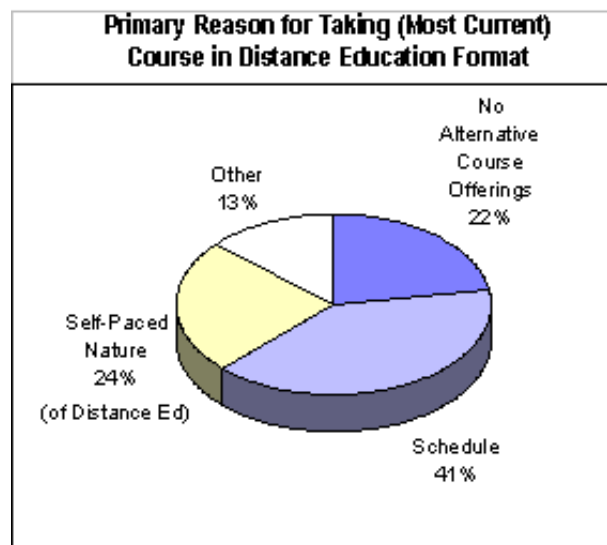
From the 1997/98 survey, the primary reason students reported for taking distance education courses revolved around upgrading skills (40% overall). One quarter of respondents (25%) reported that attaining a credential was their primary reason for taking this course. Differences in the wording of the options prevent meaningful comparisons being made between the two surveys.

Learning Material Ratings

These questions examined how students felt about their learning materials on a number of quality issues. In general, these questions elicited positive feedback and no areas of concern were evident. For instance, 97% considered that upon delivery the learning materials were in good condition. In terms of delivery, 91% agreed that the learning materials arrived in reasonable time. Further, 84% agreed that the presentation of course

materials was of a consistent high quality, while 89% agreed that course materials were well organized.

Although changes to the 1997/98 survey make direct comparisons to the 1995/96 survey inappropriate, some observations can be made. For instance, 80% somewhat agreed or agreed that the printed materials were of a consistent high quality. 85% somewhat agreed or agreed that learning materials arrived on time.

Tutoring

Over half the survey respondents (52%), used the tutoring service, and of those who did, 98% thought tutoring was important. 70% of all students who used the service reported that tutoring was readily available. Just over half of all students (51%) would consider using E-Mail tutoring. Most respondents preferred the tutoring services be available at night. Health students used tutoring the most and it is therefore not surprising that in their verbatim suggestions for improvement, access to tutoring was often mentioned as an area of concern.

Computer Use in Course Work

Although it varies depending on the program area, use of computers to complete course-work increased overall, from 44% to over 56% over the two surveys.

Course Experience Ratings

Results from the 1997/98 survey indicate that 92% of students found their course challenging. Furthermore, 90% reported they would take another BCIT distance education course. For those that would not take another course, their reasons were varied but more often than not had do with an issue in the respondent's personal life as opposed to an issue with the course itself. Comparisons with the 1995/96 data after adjusting for scale differences, indicate that overall these service ratings have remained steady.

Student Access to Technology

Over 70% of all respondents reported that they had access to a 486 computer (or better). 59% reported they had access to a modem, while 69% reported they had access to a CD-Rom. In all, 40% use the web on a regular basis, while over half (53%) use E-Mail on a regular basis. 44% of the cohort reported they had at least general knowledge of the Web.

A new question was included which asked students how familiar they were with the web and internet:

How Familiar Are You With the Web/Internet

None 22%   Expert 4%   General 40%   Little 34%
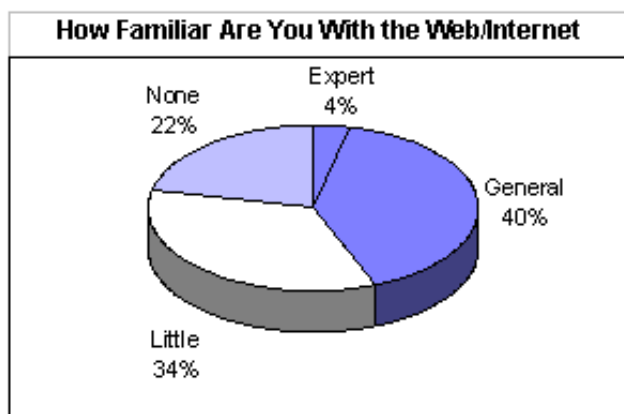
Those from the above figure who reported they had at least general knowledge of the web, (44%) were further asked to report on perceived barriers to conducting course-work on the web. The two most frequently reported issues:

- **just over half, (53%) reported that the slow speed of web access would be a barrier;**
- **just under half (49%) reported that the cost of an internet service provider would be a barrier**

In total, 75% of this group reported that there would be at least one barrier to conducting their course-work on the web.

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