# FIRST TIME ONLINE LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS
# OF SUPPORT SERVICES PROVIDED

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## ABSTRACT

The number of online continuous education and training initiatives continues to increase in Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and by extension, the number of adult learners who are unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the online teaching and learning environment. The extent to which these learners can derive maximum benefit from these initiatives depends on the rate at which they can adapt to the new circumstances and, as a result, function effectively in this type of teaching and learning environment. To this end, while supporting learners is recognized as a critical success factor little has been explored or documented specific to the Caribbean-SIDS context.

The purpose of this study therefore was to describe the support services provided first time online learners in the context of Caribbean-SIDS and examine what if any benefit learners derived from them through their perceptions of these services.

The findings reveal that participants' overall perception of the support services was high. They also reveal that although participants' awareness of ongoing support services was variable, their rating of the need for and importance of this type of support was also high. The findings suggest that providing support for first time online learners in the context of Caribbean SIDS positively impacts their performance in the online teaching and learning environment.

**Keywords:** learner support; first time online learners; small island developing states (SIDS); human resource capacity development; online teaching and learning.

## INTRODUCTION

Continuous education and training are seen as the most appropriate means for small island developing states (SIDS) such as the Caribbean to develop their human resource capacity and thereby mitigate the adverse effects of globalization (Atchoarena, 2009;Greene, 2007). In addition, information and communication technology (ICT) are considered an appropriate approach to delivering these initiatives given the human and financial constraints faced by this group of developing countries (Atchoarena, 2009; Jules, 2008). As a result, online continuous education and training initiatives are on the increase in Caribbean-SIDS and by extension, so are the number of first time online learners, unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the online teaching and learning environment (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Nash, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003).

The extent to which these learners can derive maximum benefit from these initiatives depends on the rate at which they can adapt to these new circumstances and, as a result, function effectively in this type of teaching and learning environment (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

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Assisting these learners in their adjustment efforts is therefore a critical component of the success of these types of initiatives. In this regard, learner support services play a key role (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003) since they serve as a vitally important and effective mechanism to counter challenges of attrition related to online learners' sense of isolation and inability to function as self-directed learners (Keegan, 2003).

In addition, knowing who the learners are and using this knowledge to inform the design and provision of learner support services increases the likelihood that they meet learner needs as well as inform best practices in this area (Hughes, 2004; Moisey & Hughes, 2008). Further, knowledge of how learners perceive the support services provided is an important element in informing the ongoing development of the Caribbean's human resource capacity through online continuous education and training. For the purpose of this study, learner support services refer to non-academic services designed to promote a successful learning experience (Moisey et al., 2008).

This study examines first time online learners' perceptions of the support services provided in the UNDP Barbados and the OECS Distance Learning Capacity Building Initiative(see[http://www.bb.undp.org/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01 articleid=11&cntnt01returnid=97](http://www.bb.undp.org/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=11&cntnt01returnid=97)) to members of the public and private sectors as well as civil society in the following Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS): St. Lucia, Grenada and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Although related to a specific population, the study seeks to contribute to our broader knowledge and understanding of supporting first time online learners in general and in the context of Caribbean-SIDS in particular. In addition, the characteristics of SIDS are common globally so it is felt that the findings of this study will be relevant to other SIDS.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### Rationale for the Initiative

UNDP Millennium Development Goal #8, "Develop a Global Partnership for Development" speaks to the need for human resource capacity development in developing countries across the world with the Organization supporting its realization through joint projects and programs. In the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), UNDP Barbados and the OECS works with its Caribbean partners to build their human resource capacity specifically in the areas of new global governance mandates and emerging national and regional reform development agendas. Specific to the use of ICT for development, UNDP's position on this issue is aptly reflected in UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's statement, "ICTs have a central role to play in the quest for development, dignity and peace." ([http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml](http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml)) In the context of human resource capacity development in OECS-SIDS and taking into consideration the benefits of ICTs, UNDP Barbados and the OECS continues to provide support for the implementation and management of public sector reform/modernization. In this regard, the Organization recognized the need for continuous education to achieve this objective as well as the advantages of online learning which would allow it to:

> ➢ reach its target audience which is often disadvantaged by limited time, distance, professional and personal constraints, and
> ➢ cost effectively update their knowledge base with minimal disruption to their personal and professional lives.

The Organization also recognized the benefits that could be derived from drawing on the professional development expertise and established learning infrastructure of its Learning Resource Centre's (LRC) Virtual Development Academy (VDA) which is an online learning program established to address the internal training needs of UNDP's globally dispersed staff ([http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml](http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml)).

In October 2006, UNDP Barbados and the OECS, with the support of its Learning Resource Centre's (LRC) Virtual Development Academy (VDA) and its OECS-SIDS partners, piloted its Distance Learning Capacity Building Initiative entitled the UNDP Global Virtual Development Academy (VDA) World Campus Initiative. This took place in St. Lucia from October to December 2006 in the first instance and February to April 2007 in the second, in Grenada from June to August 2007 in the first instance and September to November 2008 in the second and in St. Vincent and the Grenadines from September to November 2008 in the first instance and March to May 2009 in the second.

## Course Description

The UNDP Barbados and the OECS consulted with its OECS-SIDS partners to identify critical training needs. Out of these consultations and in the context of the adverse impact of globalization and the need for human resource capacity development to counter these challenges, the decision was taken to offer the UNDP VDA Advanced Negotiations course. This course was developed through the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program and the Consensus Building Institute (CBI) and, with input from the focal points in each country, was adapted to reflect the specific contexts of OECS-SIDS. The course consisted of six modules each containing a set of key concepts, key concept questions, a case example with related questions, an interactive exercise, and self-assessment worksheets. The interactive exercise took the form of face-to-face, real time, group simulations of various aspects of the negotiation process. In addition, each module contained an assignment which was described in detail, accompanied by clear assessment rubrics and was to be completed and submitted via email attachment within one week.

The course concluded with a final examination which consisted of an assignment which participants had to complete and submit also via email attachment within one week. Participants were given clear guidelines as to how they would communicate with facilitators, how to access the course, how the course would be conducted, the estimated amount of time they would need to complete each module, the deadlines for submission of assignments, the length of time facilitators would take to provide feedback, how grades would be awarded, and technical requirements. Cognizant of the fact that the majority of participants would be first time online learners, of equal importance to UNDP Barbados and the OECS in selecting this course was the fact that it was facilitated.

## THE PARTICIPANTS

The course targeted public service officials and their counterparts in Non-Profit Organizations (NGOs) as well as civil society. The criteria for consideration for selection were that these persons should be, or in the very near future intend to be, engaged in local, regional and/or international negotiations in specifically stated areas. The overall objective was to train a total of one hundred participants in each of the three countries. Participants were divided into cohorts of fifty.

Each cohort was further divided into two groups of twenty-five persons each with one facilitator assigned per group. Overall responsibility for all aspects of the course rested with focal points in each country. In St. Lucia it was the Public Sector Reform Unit and the St. Lucia Government Training Division. In Grenada it was the Government's Human Resources Development Unit and in St. Vincent and the Grenadines it was the Service Commissions Department within the Government Public Service Commission.

The selection criteria and the manner in which the process was undertaken were left to the discretion of the focal points in each country.

## LEARNER SUPPORT

UNDP Barbados and the OECS recognized that although there were several benefits to be gained from the online delivery of training, this delivery mode also presented its own unique challenges especially considering the fact that the majority of participants were first timers to online teaching and learning.

As a result, UNDP Barbados and the OECS contracted the services of the University of the West Indies Open Campus (formerly the University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre, UWIDEC) for the purpose of supporting the online learning component of the initiative. Specifically, the UWI Open Campus was responsible for providing continuous support and advice to UNDP Barbados and the OECS based on its technical expertise in the area of online learning and knowledge management in the Caribbean since the 1980s.

The specific details of the contract were itemized in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which was agreed to and signed by the two parties. The Assistant Curriculum Development Specialist based at the UWI Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, was the UWI Open Campus member of staff given the responsibility for carrying out the terms of the agreement of the MOU and is referred to throughout the initiative as the Consultant.

Learner support was conceptualized and provided as two separate but interrelated activities: preparatory and ongoing. Three service items were designed and used as preparatory learner support: an information booklet, a self-assessment questionnaire, and face-to-face orientation sessions. Ongoing support consisted of the human element provided by the Consultant throughout the initiative.

## REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

In order to achieve sustainable development Caribbean-SIDS need to develop their human resource capacity (Atchoarena, 2009; Downes, 2007). In addition, the use of ICT is a viable option to support this objective (Atchoarena, 2009; Jules, 2008; Tromp, 2010). However, while the academic component of any educational or training initiative is vitally important, the non-academic support (Moisey & Hughes, 2008) provided learners is equally important. This is especially so in environments such as the Caribbean, where online teaching and learning are relatively new.

### Attrition and Persistence in Online Programmes

Face-to-face and online learning programmes are experiencing increases in their part-time student enrolment and this trend is expected to continue for the foreseeable future (Nash, 2005; Rovai, 2003). Among this group is a population of 'nontraditional' students with the following characteristics: over 24 years of age, with family and work commitments, studying part-time while working full-time (Rovai, 2003). Of note is that persistence rates among this group are lower than for full-time students and even lower among online learners (Berge & Huang, 2004; Rovai, 2003; Simpson, 2004; Smith & Curry, 2005). Because the online environment and learning at a distance present their own unique challenges it becomes necessary to examine the reasons for persistence and attrition specific to this group (Rovai, 2003; Simpson, 2004).

Reasons posited include: student characteristics and skills prior to admission, as well as external and internal factors affecting students after admission (Rovai, 2003). Ready access to student support services (Rovai, 2003; Smith & Curry, 2005) that promote proactive contact and interventions between the institution and its students (Simpson, 2004) has been identified as an effective means of addressing these challenges.

**Designing Support to Meet the Needs of the Online Learner**

Knowing who the learners are and using this knowledge to inform the design and provision of learner support services increases the likelihood that they meet learner needs as well as inform best practices in this area (Hughes, 2004; Moisey et al., 2008). Six core elements that should inform this knowledge are: student characteristics, course or programme demands, geography, technology, scale and management systems (Tait, 2000). In addition, ready access to student support services assists in meeting the needs of the online learner (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004) and minimizes the distractions caused by the use of technology (Rovai, 2003).

Importantly, student support services must take into account the multiple layers of support online learners require (Smith & Curry, 2005), the different phases of the learning process: learner intake, learner intervention, learner support, learner transition, and measurement of effectiveness (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004) as well as the patterns of withdrawal: withdrawal dates, withdrawal stages and withdrawal routes (Simpson, 2004). In this regard, the required layers should be identified at the outset so that roles and responsibilities are established and clear (Smith & Curry, 2005), and the aims and effects of the strategies designed reflect the different types of needs learners have at each particular point in the process (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Rovai, 2003).

In the early stages of the learning experience learners need to know what is required of them and what they can expect from the educational provider in terms of administrative, technological, study skills assistance and counseling (Hughes, 2004). At this stage, goal setting and assessing learners' readiness for online learning should form the key tasks of the support services (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). In addition, it is important for learners to know that help is there if they need it (Hughes, 2004, p. 375). During the middle stages, the primary purpose of support services is to assist learners in building their self-development and independent learning skills (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). Key tasks include strategies that foster learners taking responsibility for their own learning and development as self-directed learners (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004). The provision of learner support services during the later stages, no matter the purpose, is meaningless without regular monitoring of learner satisfaction and using the findings to inform improvements (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Hughes, 2004; Smith & Curry, 2005). The role of support personnel at each juncture is to provide assistance as required which means striking the balance between;

> ➢ being available and being intrusive (Hughes, 2004, p. 371) and
> ➢ providing "just-in-case resources" and "just-in-time resources" (Hughes, 2004, p. 368) that take into account the unique non-academic responsibilities of the online learner.

Underlying the provision of these resources are flexibility, continuous availability, easy accessibility and genuine usefulness of the support services to the learners (Hughes, 2004).

**Developing Self-directed Learners**

The competencies and skills adults need to function effectively as self-directed learners have and continue to receive focused attention. Specific to online teaching and learning, learners' ability to work alone, independently, manage their time effectively, possess computing, literacy discussion and interpersonal interaction skills, in other words, to be self-directed learners, are considered the required skill set (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Nash, 2005; Rovai, 2003). However, learners do not necessarily possess this skill set and therefore it must be "explicitly taught and supported in the online learning environment" (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003, p. 3).

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In this regard, providing learner support is a vitally important and effective mechanism to counter challenges of attrition related to learners' sense of isolation and inability to function as self-directed learners (Keegan, 2003). Specifically, this is accomplished through learners' interaction with members of the support services on an ongoing basis during learning. The process involves scaffolding the support provided. This means that support is more structured at the beginning of the learning experience, becoming less so as learners master the necessary competencies and skills and responsibility for their own learning is therefore gradually turned over to them (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003, p. 3).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

One of the major challenges facing online teaching and learning is not in attracting students but in retaining them (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Park & Choi, 2009) and learner support services can and do mitigate against the likelihood of this happening (Park & Choi, 2009). This is because learner support services interact with students throughout their [online] programs of study. As a result, they are able to provide the continuity and focused attention students need to be effective in this environment (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Further, ensuring that these services fulfill their intended purpose requires that they be developed with a learner-centered philosophy.

According to Hughes (2004), support services that are learner-centered are more appropriately designed, implemented and, most importantly, meaningful to learners when they reflect a clear understanding of who the learners are. As a result, gathering the necessary information to inform the composition of these services is a systematic process involving the following three separate but interrelated activities.

The first requires creating an inventory of learners' readiness for online learning, access to and familiarity with the technology required, and individual learning style (Hughes, 2004, p. 368).

This activity involves learners in self-assessment exercises since these allow them to focus on their skills, needs, expectations and areas that require special attention and in this way not only prepare themselves for online learning but put themselves in a better position to benefit from the experience (Hughes, 2004).

Self-assessment activities also provide learners with the opportunity to determine whether or not they possess the necessary competencies and skills required for online learning (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). The second requires orientation activities that familiarize learners with what to expect in an online teaching and learning environment in general and those related to computer-mediated communication in particular (Mykota & Duncan 2007).

In addition, they should;

> ➢ give learners a sense of what it is like to be an online learner;
> ➢ offer tips for being successful in an online teaching and learning environment;
> ➢ define technical requirements and prerequisite skills; and
> ➢ describe the steps to access online courses (Krauth & Carbajal1999, in Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003, p. 8).

The third requires regular monitoring of learner satisfaction and using the findings to inform improvements (Hughes, 2004).

**Learner Support in the UNDP Barbados and the OECS Initiative**

Learner support services were developed around the conceptual framework described above and provided as two separate but interrelated activities: preparatory and ongoing. Three service items were designed and used as preparatory learner support: a self-assessment questionnaire, an information booklet and face-to-face orientation sessions. Ongoing support consisted of the human element provided by the Consultant throughout the initiative and feedback from the evaluation questionnaire provided by each cohort.

**Preparatory Support**

**The Self-Assessment Questionnaire**

*A* twenty item self-assessment questionnaire was designed and developed by the Consultant and edited and approved by the UNDP Barbados and the OECS Governance Program Manager and the UNDP Chief, OHR/Learning Resources Centre. The questionnaire was emailed to participants prior to the start of the course. The deadline for participants to email the completed questionnaire to the Consultant was at least one week prior to the start of the course.

The purpose of the self-assessment questionnaire was to give participants the opportunity to reflect on and objectively and critically determine their technological readiness for the course in terms of access to and use of computers, as well as their competence in sending and receiving e-mails, use of the Internet, hyperlinks, search engines and word processing software. Participants were asked to rate their level of technological proficiency using a five point rating scale ranging from one which was unskilled, two which was beginner, three which was intermediate, four which was advanced and five which was expert. Participants whose self-assessment was unskilled to intermediate were deemed to need assistance which was provided by the Consultant via e-mail and telephone contact prior to the start of the course.

**The Information Booklet**

The Consultant developed and disseminated a detailed information booklet which was intended to assist participants in coping adequately in an online environment especially in light of the fact that the majority of them were first timers. The information booklet included sections on:

> ➤ **The rationale for the initiative**
> ➤ **The partners who had pooled their expertise and resources to design, develop and deliver the course**
> ➤ **The course**
> ➤ **The value of continuous education and lifelong learning**
> ➤ **Online teaching and learning and what participants could expect in this environment.**

The information booklet was edited and approved by the UNDP Barbados and the OECS Governance Program Manager and the UNDP Chief, OHR/Learning Resources Centre and distributed to participants on the day of the launch of the course.

**The Face-to-Face Orientation Sessions**

Face-to-face orientation sessions were conducted on two different occasions. One took place at the launch of the course for each cohort and took the form of a two part session conducted by a representative of the course facilitators and the Consultant.

The course facilitator's session was in the form of an interactive exercise entitled "win as much as you can" which was aimed at sensitizing participants to the negotiating process.

The purpose of the Consultant's session was to ensure that participants were aware of the pertinent competencies and skills they needed to function effectively in an online teaching and learning environment. In this regard, the Consultant briefed participants on the course, the online environment and emphasized the need for them to manage their time effectively and efficiently.

Participants were urged to view time management as an essential component in developing their learning strategies for continuous education in an online teaching and learning environment. The Consultant also used these sessions to inform participants about ongoing support services that had been put in place for them to avail themselves of should the need arise. These included the technical assistance provided by the relevant agency within the government, the physical space for meetings and group activities in the country and the Consultant for all non-course related queries, concerns and needs throughout the course.

In reviewing the roll out of the course in St. Lucia, the Consultant recognized that carrying out pre-course preparatory activities solely at the launch of the course did not provide adequate time to properly prepare participants for online teaching and learning. Problems encountered as a result and reported to UNDP Barbados and the OECS included: participants unaware of the support services available to them during the course, and the inability of the Consultant to adequately sensitize participants to the importance of time management as well as address technological and computer proficiency problems encountered by participants.

In addition, a number of participants from these cohorts found it difficult to complete assignments on time and, in some cases, found it necessary to withdraw from the course due to work commitments. This served to reinforce the realization that more time and focused attention were needed for orientation to online teaching and learning.

As a result, an integral part of pre-course preparatory activities for both cohorts in Grenada and St. Vincent and the Grenadines were face-to-face briefing sessions with prospective participants. Both sets of meetings took place months before the start of the course in each country and took the form of small group discussions and question and answer periods with prospective participants.

Persons were grouped by department, groups did not exceed fifteen members and each session lasted approximately one hour. Each session consisted of a presentation about the UNDP Learning Resource Centre's (LRC) Virtual Development Academy (VDA), a discussion about online teaching and learning, the growing need for continuous education and lifelong learning in Caribbean-SIDS, the value of time management in effectively coping with the demands of lifelong learning and the role of the Consultant throughout the course. Participants were also given a written brief about the program.

## Ongoing Support
### The Consultant
The Consultant kept in close contact with the course facilitators and based on feedback assisted participants who were experiencing difficulty in completing and submitting assignments on time. Assistance included arranging the rescheduling of submission of assignments, encouraging delinquent participants to stay focused and stick to the schedule they had made at the start of the course. It also included working with them in identifying and if possible rectifying the cause of the delinquency. On occasion, some participants experienced technical difficulty submitting assignments to their course facilitators.

In these instances, the Consultant acted as the conduit. Ongoing communication with participants was via email or telephone, either individually or collectively to assist when problems arose, answer queries, offer advice or motivate participants who were lagging behind. Ongoing program evaluation was carried out through the administration of an online questionnaire to each cohort as well as feedback from course facilitators and the focal points in each country.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was twofold:

> ➤ to describe the learner support services provided first time online learners in the UNDP Barbados and the OECS Distance Learning Capacity Building Initiative and
> ➤ to determine learners' perceptions of these services.

To achieve the latter, a standard set of questions was asked about the topic to each cohort, the objective being to describe the nature of the existing conditions at a particular point in time. In addition, the sample was geographically dispersed, and the data needed to be collected, anonymously, quickly and inexpensively (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009).

As a result, data were collected through an eight item questionnaire designed and administered to participants electronically using the online survey program Zoomerang at the end of the roll out of the course for each cohort. Participants were asked to rate their perceptions of each of the learner support services provided. Four items were open-ended which allowed participants to expand on their responses as well as suggest ways in which each service item could be improved. Participants were asked to rate the four closed-ended items using the following five point Likert scale: 1=N/A, 2=Poor, 3=Average, 4=Good, 5=Excellent. The questionnaire informed participants that an integral part of the Consultant's responsibility during the course was to provide the non-course related support necessary for them to achieve course completion and to ensure that their online experience was a fruitful and productive one. Further, that the service items listed were used in an effort to provide this support and that their feedback was necessary in order to evaluate their perceptions of the support services provided.

In addition, any suggestions participants might have for improving these service items were welcome. The questionnaire was pilot tested by the UNDP Barbados and the OECS Governance Programme Manager, the UNDP Chief, OHR/Learning Resources Centre, the UNDP Barbados and the OECS Programme Officer-Governance, and the Consultant. Questionnaire administration, completion and response rates by cohort are presented in Table: 1 below.

**Table: 1**
**Questionnaire Administration, Completion and Response Rates by Cohort**

| Cohort Name & Number | Administered | Completed | Response Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| St. Lucia Cohort #1 | 37 | 18 | 49% |
| St. Lucia Cohort #2 | 40 | 21 | 53% |
| Grenada Cohort #1 | 39 | 10 | 26% |
| Grenada Cohort #2 & St. Vincent & the Grenadines Cohort #1 | 43 +43 = 86 | 40 | 47% |
| St. Vincent & the Grenadines Cohort #2 | 36 | 12 | 33% |

## FINDINGS

### The Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Participants were informed that the self-assessment questionnaire was intended to assist them in preparing for online learning as well as the technological component of the course.  Participants were asked to rate their perception of the self-assessment questionnaire in terms of their need for and the importance of performing this activity, as well as its helpfulness in assisting them in preparing for online learning  as well as in determining their level of technological proficiency. Participants' perceptions of the self-assessment questionnaire per cohort are shown in Figure: 1 below.
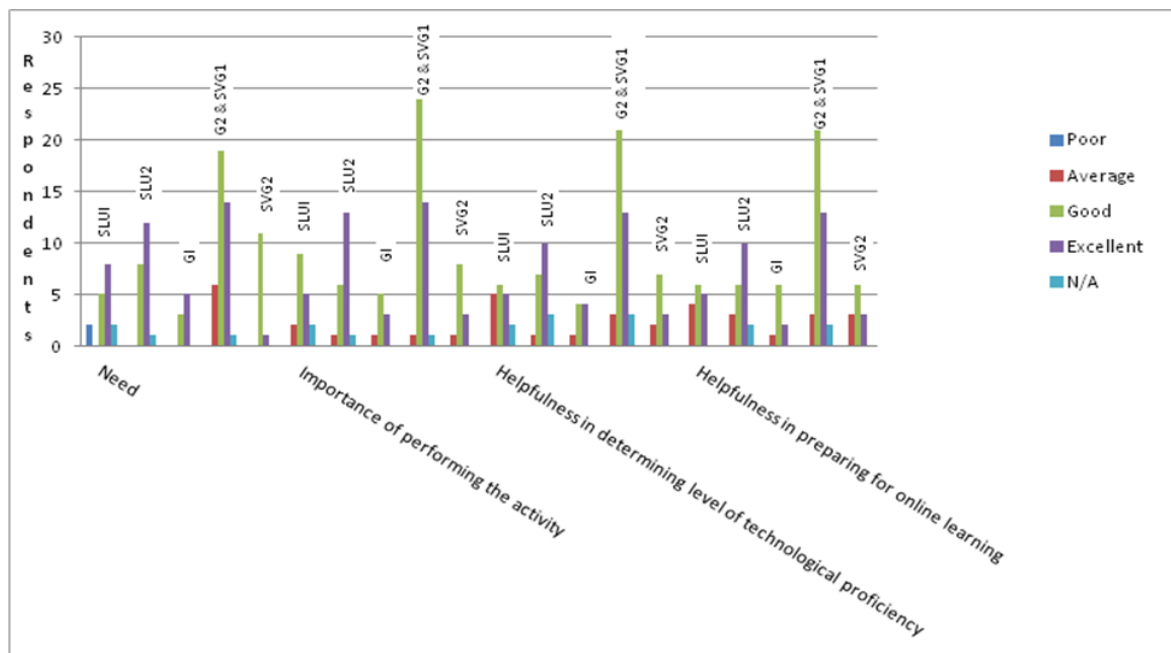


**Figure: 1**
**Rating of Self-Assessment Questionnaire by all Cohorts**

Participants' comments on the self-assessment questionnaire support their rating of good or excellent on all aspects of this item. According to one St. Lucia Cohort 2 participant, "The self-assessment questionnaire was very good. It allows you to review yourself and see where you are at and work to be better. It helped me so I believe it can help others if they are determined". According to another St. Lucia Cohort 2 participant, "I found the self-assessment questionnaire most valuable as it forced me to judge my performance and so I felt challenged to improve, do better since I had to give feedback." A Grenada Cohort 2 or St. Vincent and the Grenadines Cohort 1 participant commented, "It made me think of things I had never thought of before".

### The Information Booklet

Participants were informed that the information booklet was intended to assist them in functioning effectively in an online teaching and learning environment by providing them with general information on online learning as well as the basic skills and competencies they would need for the course. Participants were asked to rate their perception of the information booklet in terms of their need for the type of information it contained, the importance as well as the helpfulness of the information in preparing them for online learning. Participants' perceptions of the information booklet per cohort are shown in Figure: 2 below.
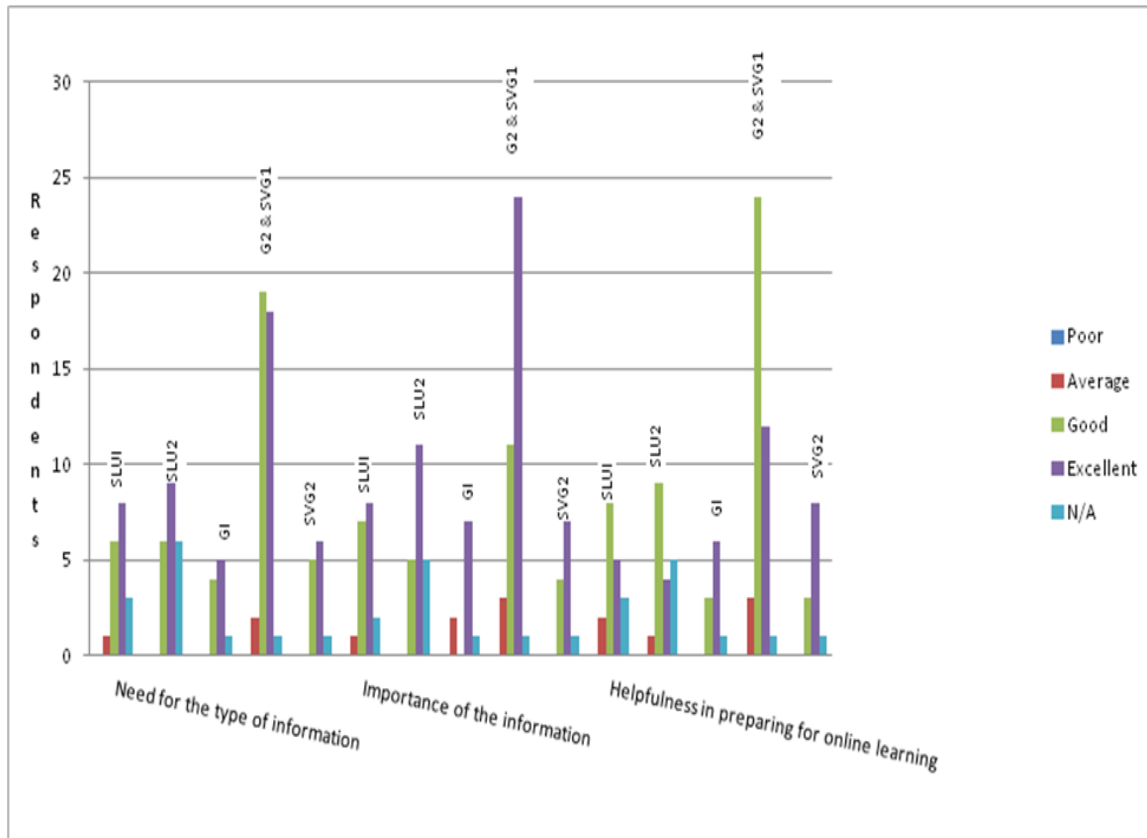
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**Figure: 2**
**Rating of the Information Booklet by all Cohorts**

In all cohorts, participants' rating of all areas of the information booklet was high. This is encouraging since the information it contained was very important and the rating indicates participants' recognition of this fact.

According to a St. Lucia Cohort 2 participant, "The participant information booklet was good reading material for the successful completion of the course."

However, based on particfipants' comments in all cohorts, consideration may have to be given to changing the format for future programs. Participants' comments included not receiving the booklet, not using it, not reading it in its entirety, and reading half of it.

Worthy of consideration is the following suggestion made by a Grenada Cohort 1 participant, "Maybe if it were online as well I would have been more inclined to complete the reading of the booklet."

### The Face-to-Face Orientation Sessions

Participants were informed that the face-to-face orientation sessions were intended to assist them in preparing for online learning.

Participants in the second cohort in Grenada and both cohorts in St. Vincent and the Grenadines were asked to rate their perception of the face-to-face orientation sessions in terms of their helpfulness and importance in preparing them for online teaching and learning. Participants' perceptions of the face-to-face orientation sessions for three cohorts are shown in Figure: 3 below.
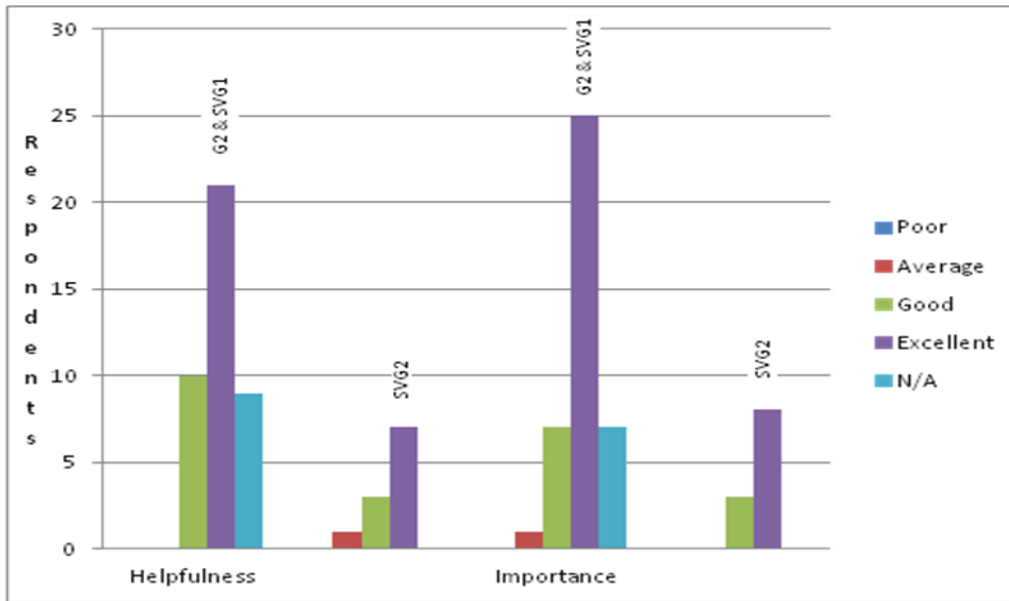
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**Figure: 3**
**Rating of the Face-to-Face Orientation Sessions by three Cohorts**

The high rating of both aspects of the face-to-face orientation sessions by all three cohorts presents food for thought for future programs especially those that involve first time online learners. In this regard, the extent to which the comment, "The face to face orientation cannot be overemphasised" made by a Grenada Cohort 2 participant is accurate merits in depth research.

**The Consultant**
Participants were informed that the role of the Consultant was to be the human element providing ongoing, individualized participant support for all non-course related matters. Participants in each cohort were asked to rate their awareness of, need for and importance of the type of service the Consultant provided in assisting them in preparing for online learning. Participants' perceptions of the Consultant per cohort are shown in Figure: 4 below.
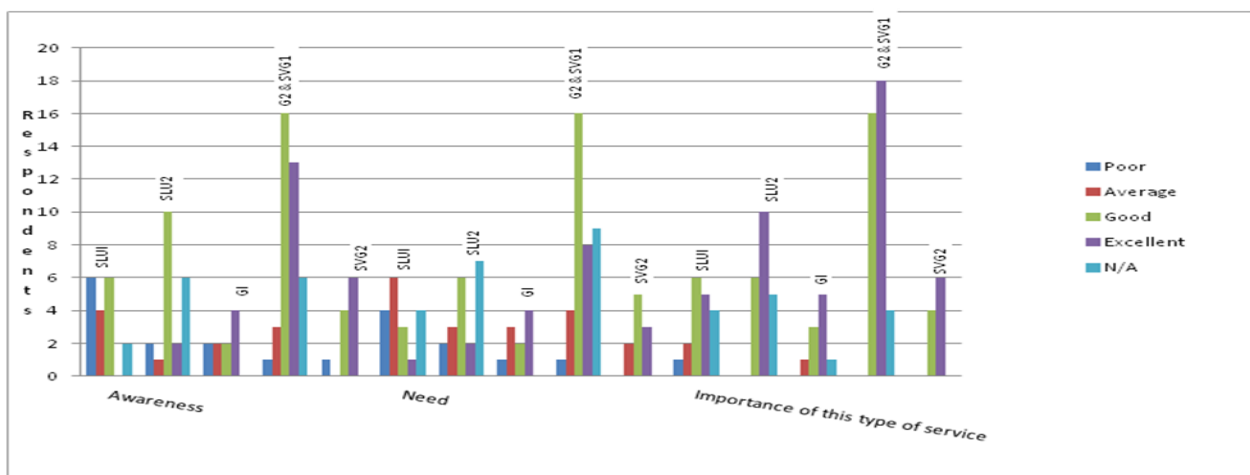


**Figure: 4**
**Rating on the Role of the Consultant by all Cohorts**

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The role of the Consultant evolved as the initiative progressed, responding to participants' perception of what it should be. At the outset, the Consultant spent the time responding to participants who needed assistance. Participants' perception that this was in fact the Consultant's role is reflected in the following comments made by St. Lucia Cohort 2 participants, "I was not in contact with the Consultant. I had no real need for that kind of assistance," and, "I am unable to contribute [to evaluating the role of the Consultant] because I did not use this service believing that this service was to be used only if I encountered difficulties in communications." The comparatively low level of awareness and relatively high level of not applicable on all items experienced by the St. Lucia cohorts and the following comments from St. Vincent and the Grenadines Cohort 1 and Grenada Cohort 2 participants caused the Consultant to reconsider and reconceptualize the role, "The presence of the Consultant needs to be felt during the course. Maybe an occasional email to the participants checking on their progress would be helpful.

The Consultant needs to be more visible throughout the whole process." "Perhaps a cordial email halfway and at the end of the course as well to keep the fires of the relationship burning for the duration of the course." "Need to be in touch with participants. Ensure persons are keeping up with the course and if not what assistance can be provided. Because the time is short it was crucial to keep participants on track and not let them fall out".

By the end of the initiative, the Consultant had incorporated participants' suggestions as part and parcel of the role. The success of doing so is reflected in the comparatively high level of awareness experienced by the second cohort in Grenada and both St. Vincent and the Grenadines cohorts. It is also reflected in the following statement from a St. Vincent and the Grenadines Cohort 2 participant, "... [The Consultant] was our "time check" and had us on the ball with deadline reminders for assignments etc. She was also very encouraging throughout the course."

Of note is that, no matter their level of awarenerss of the Consultant, participants rated the need for and importance of this type of service comparatively high throughout the initiative. This rating is supported by the following two comments, "Although I did not use the Consultant, I can understand the necessity for one" St. Lucia Cohort 2 participant and "I did not encounter any major problems and hence the need for the Consultant was minimal. But it's a good idea to have one" St. Vincent and the Grenadines Cohort 1 and Grenada Cohort 2 participant.

## DISCUSSION

### Achievements
By the end of the initiative, a total of two hundred and thirty-eight members of the public and private sectors as well as civil society in three Caribbean OECS-SIDS countries had received just-in-time training in the latest practices in negotiations from one of the premier institutions in this area in the world. In addition, one hundred and fifty-four persons had been added to the original list of eighty-four who had taken an online course. Further, by using ICTs to deliver the training, limited, if any, disruption to the workforce took place and persons disadvantaged by time, distance and other constraints were able to avail themselves of specialized training and economies of scale were realized.

A Grenadian Cohort 2 participant expresses his/her views on the experience as follows, "Pursuing this course online has really changed my perception about distance learning via the Internet.

In fact, I am in the process of registering to complete a Masters Degree online." Whether this is an isolated instance or not is beyond the scope of this study. However, this sentiment suggests that exposure to online teaching and learning via the short course in advanced negotiations could have served to dispel previously held myths about this mode of teaching and learning as well as a catalyst for the increase in this type of training initiative in the future.

## Lessons Learned

- Designing, developing and implementing student support services with a learner centered philosophy is a fundamental element in ensuring that they fulfill their intended purpose.
- The active involvement of participants' supervisors in all aspects of the initiative was an important element in ensuring their full cooperation and support for the undertaking. It also ensured that the participants selected would not only benefit from the training but would also return to an environment conducive to the use and transfer of the knowledge and skills gained.
- The pre-course, face-to-face, small group briefing meetings were found to be very effective in preparing first time online learners for the peculiarities of the teaching and learning environment. This was endorsed by participants' comments and supports Menchaca & Bekele (2008) findings of the importance of face to face interaction for the success of online learning (p.244).
- Face-to-face orientation sessions, especially at the early stages of an online initiative, provide synchronous avenues for clarification, sensitization, and information exchange which participants found very important. As such, they are critical elements in the success of these ventures.
- The end of cohort questionnaire proved invaluable. This is because it provided continuous feedback from participants who highlighted areas in need of attention, and provided participants with the opportunity to voice any concerns they may have had on an ongoing basis. The result was that it allowed for the making of appropriate, ongoing and informed adjustments to all aspects of the initiative. In this regard, the following changes were made to the offering of the course in Grenada and St. Vincent and the Grenadines: 1) the inclusion of the face-to-face briefing meetings; 2) the addition of two 'catch up weeks' where students were given one week's break in the middle and at the end of the course in order to concentrate on completing and submitting assignments and 3) the active involvement of participants' supervisors. Ultimately, this allowed the support services to be responsive to participants' needs thereby ensuring that they fulfilled their intended purpose.
- There is no denying that 'life intervenes' which means that, despite the best intentions, there will be persons who find that due to circumstances beyond their control they have to withdraw from training initiatives. Increasingly, this is part and parcel of lifelong learning. That being said however, participants who successfully completed the course demonstrated that they were able to manage their time effectively and were highly organized.
- Not everyone possesses time management and organizational skills which are the core competencies and skills required to become self-directed learners especially in the online teaching and learning environment. Special attention therefore needs to be paid to identifying persons in need and then providing them with the necessary individual and group opportunities to develop these competencies and skills.

**Attrition and Persistence in Online Programmes**

Attrition and persistence in online programmes always occur at some undetermined level (Simpson, 2004),due to natural circumstances of life such as illness (Simpson, 2004)and as such, is beyond the control of institutions, support services, faculty and so on (Simpson, 2004). This recognition must therefore underpin any discussion on this topic. In this regard, UNDP Barbados and the OECS Distance Learning Capacity Building Initiative fell short of meeting its original target of three hundred trainees by thirty-eight, approximately 13% as outlined in Table: 2 below.

**Table: 2**
**Participant Withdrawal and Completion Data**

| Name | # Selected | # Withdrew | Withdrawal Rate | # Started | # Completed | Completion Rate |
|------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|
| ST. Lucia cohort 1 | 50 | 13 | 26% | 37 | 37 | 100% |
| St. Lucia cohort 2 | 50 | 7 | 14% | 43 | 40 | 93% |
| Grenada cohort 1 | 50 | 2 | 4% | 48 | 39 | 81% |
| Grenada cohort 2 | 50 | 0 | 0% | 50 | 43 | 86% |
| SVG cohort 1 | 62 | 19 | 31% | 43 | 43 | 100% |
| SVG cohort 2 | 69 | 25 | 36% | 44 | 36 | 82% |

Further, of the three hundred and thirty-three participants originally selected, sixty-six (approximately 20%) withdrew on or before the start of the course due to time constraints or work commitments. This suggests participants' innate awareness of the challenges associated with balancing work, study and life (Hughes, 2004) and their ability to prioritize their activities at a particular point in time. Research will need to be carried out to substantiate the veracity of these assertions, and if this is so, to determine if support was at all necessary for these participants. The withdrawal rate also suggests that the face-to-face sessions which discussed these issues in depth might have been a contributory factor. Research will therefore need to be carried out to determine if this is the case and if it is the extent to which it is so. Of the two hundred and sixty-five participants who started the course, twenty-seven (10%) withdrew at various stages throughout the course. In all instances, this was due to participants' failure to complete and submit assignments as outlined in Table: 3 below.

**Table: 3**
**Participants' Assignment Completion and Submission Data**

| Cohort | # of participants not completing | 0 | #1 | #2 | #3 | #4 | #5 | #6 |
|--------|----------------------------------|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| St. Lucia cohort 2 | 3 | XX | X | X | | | | |
| Grenada cohort 1 | 9 | XXXX | XXXXX | XX | | | | |
| Grenada cohort 2 | 7 | XX | XXXXX | XX | XX | XX | XX | X |
| SVG cohort 2 | 8 | XXXXX | XXX | XX | | | | |

Failure to complete and submit assignments occurred despite generous extensions of deadlines for submission of assignments by course facilitators and continuous coaxing from the Consultant. According to Simpson (2004), it is important to establish patterns of withdrawal (p. 82). The author's withdrawal stages, which examine the rate of submission of assignments, best describe and corroborate the attrition and persistence practices of participants who were active at the start of the course. Most participants did not submit the first assignment and of those who did, only a small number submitted subsequent assignments (Simpson, 2004).

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Further research therefore needs to be undertaken to obtain accurate patterns of withdrawal in general, and explain in more detail the withdrawal stages that occurred in this study, in particular the Grenada Cohort 2 participant who completed and submitted all assignments but failed to complete the final examination. The findings can identify the point at which participants are most likely to withdraw as well as inform the decisions regarding the types of and times when future student support services are most critical.

## Designing Support to Meet the Needs of the Online Learner

Designing student support services that meet the needs of online learners in general and first time online learners in the context of Caribbean-SIDS in particular is another area that needs further research. In this regard, identifying what if any are the factors of impact, the critical components, the most effective means of determining learner profiles, ways of identifying the most vulnerable students (Simpson, 2004) and the characteristics of each particular cohort of students (Tait, 2000) are the most essential elements of this exercise.  Effective ways of using the research findings to inform the types of support services that meet learners' specific needs (Simpson, 2004) are equally important elements of this exercise. Further, integral to developing Caribbean-SIDS human resource capacity through online continuous education and training is the fact that participants could be new to post secondary education and/or online learning or they may be returning to education after some time (Hughes, 2004).

Research will therefore need to be carried out to determine if this is the case and, if it is, if study skills assistance to reduce participants' stress level, enhance their learning experience and meet the challenges associated with them balancing work, study and family life (Hughes, 2004) need to be included as part of student support services in future online continuous education and training initiatives.

## Developing Self-directed Learners

An integral part of developing the skills necessary to become self-directed learners is social interaction which, in turn, is built on the development of online communities of learners (Ludwig-Hardman et al. 2003, p.11). Research will therefore need to be carried out to determine;

> ➢ the extent to which Caribbean-SIDS participants naturally possess self-directed learning skills, 2) if social interaction is an integral part of developing these skills, and
> ➢ if activities that specifically address the development and support of communities of learners should be included in future online continuous education and training initiatives as part of students support services.

## CONCLUSIONS

The UNDP Barbados and the OECS Distance Learning Capacity Building Initiative represented a completely novel approach to human resource capacity development in Caribbean-SIDS. Despite being in unchartered territory, the initiative recorded several tangible achievements which serve to suggest that online teaching and learning can cost effectively and efficiently address human resource capacity development in Caribbean-SIDS.

In this regard, this study supports the findings that student support services positively impact learners' performance in the online teaching and learning environment. It also supports the findings that, in order to be effective, these support services need to be designed and developed using a learner-centered philosophy.

In order for online continuous education and training initiatives to be successful, all aspects of student support services need to be addressed (Smith & Curry, 2005). In this regard, this study revealed areas in need of further research that are specific to our understanding of supporting first time online learners in the context of Caribbean-SIDS.

In addition, although according to Tait (2000) there is no universal blue print for the establishment of student support services, this study has contributed to determining some of the key factors that lead to what Sampson (2003) refers to as "successful, satisfied [first time online] students" (p.104) in general and Caribbean-SIDS in particular.

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