Graduate Students' Perception of a New Online Library and Information Science Program at a Regional Library School in the Caribbean: A Preliminary Investigation

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Online education is gaining momentum as technology continues to have an impact on the teaching and learning process. As a result, many library schools are currently offering library and information science (LIS) education in blended and online modes. This preliminary research is an examination of graduate students' perception of a new online program implemented at a regional library school in the Caribbean. Fourteen participants were interviewed. The majority of the students enrolled in the programs were females between the ages of 30 and 49. Their primary reasons for studying online were distance from the university, family responsibilities, and work commitment. Students had a positive perception of most components of the program. They indicated a willingness to recommend the program to othershowever, they were not satisfied with quality and timeliness of feedback provided for some courses andthe availability of resources. To improve the experience of online students, necessary resources need to be procured and strategies employed to provide timely and quality feedback.

Keywords: Caribbean, Caribbean tertiary education, graduate education, higher education, online education, students' perception, LIS education

Duderstadt (1997, p. 79) identified four significant themes related to technological advancement that have converged in the 1990s and ushered in a new way of life: the importance of knowledge as a key factor in determining security, prosperity, and quality of life; the global nature of our society; the ease with which information technology enables the rapid exchange of information; and networking. He believes that knowledge-intensive organizations such as universities will be affected by these changes as there will be strong competition for students and resources. The changes are already evident, as e-learning is considered the "fastest growing market in education" (Oguz, Chu, & Chow, 2015, p. 214, citing IBIS Capital). Library and information studies (LIS) education

KEY POINTS:

- Enrolment in LIS education is increasing internationally, and the trend has been adopted at the Department of Library and Information Studies at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in Jamaica.
- The launch of the online program has resulted in an increase in enrolment at the library school, with the increase evident in the online mode.
- The online program is meeting the needs of a geographically dispersed population as students are able to capitalize on the benefits of learning online.

has been responsive to changes in education brought about by the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT). Islam, Kunifuji, Hyama, and Miura (2011, p. 15) found that 23% of the 390 LIS programs they examined were using e-learning options for students who were experiencing difficulty accessing the face-to-face mode. Given that research was conducted a decade ago, and with the advancements in technology and increase in its use, these statistics would be significantly different today. Hirsh and colleagues (2015) describe how the faculty at San José State University School of Information have been internationalising their curriculum and methods to ensure their programme "reach across national boundaries" (p. S28). This global trend has implications for small island states such as those in the Caribbean. Regionally, LIS education is now online for students who desire to pursue such an option. This creates opportunities for citizens to gain international certification, access more diverse educational opportunities, and take advantage of the additional benefits of online education.

The most compelling reason for online education in the Caribbean is the distance between the islands. The geographical landscape of the Caribbean makes online education especially relevant for students who are bound by time and place. The region is composed of a chain of islands: The "sea is approximately 2,640,000 km² in extent and contains over 7,000 cays, islands, islets and reefs" (Granger, 2010). In addition, the larger islands have large populations within their rural areas that need to have access to educational opportunities. Worldometer reports that the population of the region was trending upwards to 44 million in 2018 (Worldometer, n.d.). Boisselle (2014) advocates that blended programs will not meet the needs of the Caribbean because "their sheer inclusion of face-to-face elements cannot adequately service at distance populations with no ability to access the brick-and-mortar locations of the matriculating institution" (p. 5). W. Smith (2011), in discussing the challenges that a dispersed geographical location presents for providing education in the Caribbean, advocates that the use of ICT "represents the most promising and cost-effective modality for redressing the equity gap since it can increase the pool of learners many-fold and achieve the desired expansion of the range of programme offerings across all socio-economic backgrounds" (p. 12). Online programs are the current way of delivering distance education. They offer 80% or more of their content in the online mode and typically do not have face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2011, p. 7).

Library education has been offered in the face-to-face mode in the region since 1971, when UNESCO provided a grant for the establishment of a regional library school (Collings, 1972). The school now offers two undergraduate programs and three graduate programs in addition to a MPhil/PhD program. The Master of Arts in Library and Information Studies (MALIS) and Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) are the focus of this paper. They were originally offered in the face-to-face mode, but the online mode was added in 2015. Considering this is the first time the library school is offering programs in dual modes, this research seeks to do the following:

1. describe the online library education program offered by the library school;
2. examine students' reasons for pursuing online LIS education;
3. describe the characteristics of these online LIS students; and
4. determine students' satisfaction with components of the online program.

This research is important, as it adds to the literature on librarianship both regionally and internationally. It investigates a phenomenon that is just emerging in the Caribbean, and it also provides information that could prove useful in helping to make the program more effective.

Library education in the region

LIS training using distant technology is not new to the region. Compton-Smith, Duff, and McDonald (2007) report that in 2005 and 2006, the library school delivered two records management courses using "web-conferencing technology and learning management software as well as some face to face sessions" (p. 303). The courses were developed and delivered by three Canadian instructors and were offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Fully online programs were to follow a decade later. In justifying the need for the online mode, the library school stated that it was informed by the following:

1. its strategic objective to "enhance learning effectiveness," which reflects the university's strategic plan to provide "multiple and flexible paths for all constituencies to pursue tertiary education in their lifetime";
2. the university's strategic plan to provide "high quality student experience as a platform for enhanced regional and international student success and long-term commitment to the university";
3. global trends in LIS education; and
4. increased global and national competition for students.

The library school program documents stated that offering the programs online could lead to an increase in enrolment, helping to fulfil the department's mission of "providing leadership in managing the information needs of the [region] for the 21st century and beyond" (Department of Library and Information Studies, n.d.). This thrust is part of a larger global trend of increased offering of online courses and programs. According to ICEF Monitor (2016), "more students signed up for MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) in 2015 than in the previous three years combined." The prediction that the online programs could result in an increase in enrolment was realized. Enrolment in the programs dramatically increased over the next three years, as is shown on Table 1.

Table 1: Number of students registered for the period 2013–2016

Date	Number of new students enrolled
2013–14	4[a]
2014–15	3[a]
2015–16	14 (9 online, 5 face to face)
2016–17	29 (25 online, 4 face to face)

[a] Prior to the implementation of the online mode

New students registering for the programs increased from four in 2013–14 to 29 in 2016–17. This represents a significant growth, with the increase evident in the online modality. The ratio of face-to-face to online students for the 2015–16 academic year was approximately 1:2, but this increased to almost 1:5 in the 2016–17 academic year.

Conceptual framework

This research is grounded in the Five Pillars for evaluating online learning presented by the Online Learning Consortium (n.d.):

1. Learning effectiveness: The provider demonstrates that online learning outcomes meet or exceed institutional, industry, and/or community standards.
2. Scale: Providers continuously improve services while reducing costs.
3. Access: All learners who wish to learn online can access learning in a wide array of programs and courses.
4. Faculty satisfaction: Faculty are pleased with teaching online, citing appreciation and happiness.
5. Student satisfaction: Students are pleased with their experiences in learning online, including interaction with instructors and peers, learning outcomes that match expectations, services, and orientation.

This preliminary evaluation focuses primarily on students' satisfaction with the program. This is necessary, considering that the program is an innovation for a library school which had previously offered programs only in the traditional mode. In addition, since the program is still in its infancy, it is too early to evaluate some components. However, students have spent one or more semesters in the program, so it is feasible to begin to document their experiences and perceptions.

Literature review

This review uses both qualitative and quantitative studies that investigated online students' demographic characteristics, the reasons students opt to study online, the characteristics of online students, and their perceptions of various elements of the online experience.

Online student demographics

BestColleges.com is of the view that an understanding of who online students are and their reasons for opting for online studies can "help to shape the decisions being made about the design and development of future online academic programs." (College Rankings: Find the College for You, 2019). Age was cited as a factor in the decision to pursue online education, as older students preferred to study online while younger students opted for both the online and face-to-face modes (Jaggars, 2014; Oguz et al., 2015; Stewart, Bachman, & Johnson, 2010). An interesting connection between age and preference was identified by Jaggars (2014), who noted that older students preferred the online environment to being in the classroom with the younger learners. The average age for online students showed the majority being between 25 and 35 (Stewart et al., 2010). On the other hand, 42.5%

of the participants in the study conducted by Hixon, Ralston-Berg, Buckenmeyer, and Barczyk (2016) were in the 25–44 age group. Pribesh, Dickinson, and Bucher (2006) found that the average age of two cohorts of LIS online graduate students was 35 and 40. Due to the varying age ranges used across studies, it was difficult to determine the average age of online learners.

Factors influencing students to study online

The research on factors influencing students to study online is robust, and these factors are classified in different ways. BestEducation.com classified factors as internal and external. In considering these external factors, it reported that that 62% of the respondents opted for online study because of work schedule, while 45% were influenced by the opportunity of not going to campus. Flexible class scheduling appealed to 44% of the respondents, while family obligations were a determining factor for 34%. Internal factors included preference for online learning (College Rankings: Find the School for You, 2019).

Oguz et al. (2015) categorized the factors into three groups: accommodation, predisposition, and selectivity. Accommodation refers to the possibility of students pursuing studies with minimal disruption to their lives. Age and employment were accommodation considerations, and these resulted in older students opting to study online to avoid time spent travelling and "potential conflicts with work and family responsibilities" (p. 223). Predisposition describes students' preference for the online mode. The choice of courses available online versus face to face (selectivity) was also a factor in choice of mode.

House, Weldon, and Wysoki (2007, p. 276) reported that one of the advantages of taking online courses was the flexibility they offered, and this finding has support from Smidt, Bunk, McGrory, Li, and Gatenby (2014), Yang and Cornelius (2004), and Astani, Ready, and Duplaga (2010). Kim, Welch, and Nam (2012) agree that flexibility is one of the greatest advantages of online education. Burns (2013) concurs and states that students who took online courses "indicated that scheduling was much more of a factor than the desire for them to take a course online" (p. 7), suggesting a preference for the face-to-face mode. Armstrong (2011) also supports this finding, noting that students believe online learning is "a convenient alternative to traditional classroom learning but indicated that convenience came with a price," as they lost "direction from and communication with instructors" (p. 224).

Characteristics of online students

Dabbagh (2007, p. 218) postulates that "the current profile of the online distance learner can be characterized as emerging, responsive to rapid technological innovations and new learning paradigms, and progressively including a younger age bracket." However, the difficulty of identifying these characteristics is evident when one examines both the difference in number of characteristics advocated by universities offering online programs and the characteristics identified. An examination of the number of characteristics produced by 10 universities showed a range from six to 10, with the mode being 10. Onlinecollege.

org (n.d.) presents these 10 characteristics that it believed are exhibited by online learners: interested in learning; inquisitive nature; able to adapt well to change; focused on personal and professional goals; persistent; having self-direction and self-efficiency; having an open mind; confident and humble; having an online presence; and showing respect for the educational process.

Students' perception of online programs

Students' perceptions of online programs were influenced by the number of courses taken (Astani et al., 2010; Stewart et al., 2010) and became more positive as they took more courses (Astani et al. 2010). In addition, students' satisfaction with online courses varied by course, with a significant difference between their perceptions of various courses (Burns, 2013, p. 7). Perceptions also varied based on familiarity with the lecturer (Yang & Cornelius, 2004). Astani et al. found that "experienced students" were more satisfied with the online courses and therefore were more likely to recommend them to others. The converse was also true (p. 19).

Research revealed students showed varying levels of satisfaction with the following components of their online program: technology use, course content, availability of resources, instructional presence, interaction, and feedback. Students reported a positive perception of availability of resources in the online library, which were readily accessed from remote locations (Yang & Cornelius, 2004). On the contrary, Pribesh et al. (2006) identified limited access to library resources as a barrier to effective online education. In addition, students reported a negative perception when course material is not logically organized and links between material are not established (Yang & Cornelius, 2004, p. 11), a finding supported by Bissessar (2014).

One of the characteristics of online education is the separation of teachers and learners (Volery, as cited in Yang & Cornelius, 2004). Smidt et al. (2014) report that participants were concerned by their perception of the absence of interaction with the lecturer. However, they warn that care must be taken not to confuse lack of instructor presence with autonomy, a feature of online education. Bissessar (2014) reported that all the participants in her research were satisfied with the online interaction provided by lecturers. She further added that there was a high level of interaction among the participants in her study and stated that they developed connections which continued outside the learning environment. Astani et al. (2010) found that students' perception of the level of interaction provided in the online environment was dependent on their experience with online learning itself.

For the most part, online students were not satisfied with the feedback they received, Smidt et al. (2014) discovered that online students expected prompt feedback but this was not always provided. Yang and Cornelius (2004) also found that students were not satisfied with the feedback from lecturers. This constituted, for them, "the main factor which shaped students' negative experience on the quality of online education" (p. 870). However, students valued the technological exposure offered by online courses as they felt that online courses provided more opportunities to use technology than face-to-face courses (Astani et al., 2010).

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized a typical case study design, which "entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case" (Bryman, 2016, p. 688). This case is the Department of Library and Information Studies, at The University of the West Indies, Mona, in Kingston Jamaica that has just implemented three online graduate programs. The population consisted of 58 graduate students from across the region who were enrolled in three graduate programs. Purposive sampling was used to select 17 students who were pursuing the MALIS and MLIS programs in the online mode. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to strategically select participants who are "relevant to the research questions that are being posed" (Bryman, 2016, p. 694). These students had spent from one to three semesters in the program, and all would have completed at least a quarter of their courses. The data were collected using an interview schedule created by the researcher consisting of 25 items. Data were coded into themes and analyzed according to research questions using the data analysis spiral advocated by Creswell (2007).

Discussion

Of the 17 students who comprised the sample, 14 participated in the research. Following is a discussion of the data.

Description of LIS online program

Both the MLIS and MALIS programs were expected to last three semesters full-time or approximately six semesters part-time, and they required students to do 10 courses and a research paper. Additionally, MLIS students were required to do a practicum and so would complete the program with 39 credits, three more than those enrolled in the MALIS program. Students had the option of registering as either online or face to face, and courses in both modes were taught by the same lecturers. Students were not expected to take courses in both modes during the same semester but could change mode each semester. The program was delivered using both synchronous and asynchronous tools. There were students who opted not to access courses asynchronously. A course management system or virtual learning environment (OURvle) was used. From this, students obtained course outlines, assignments, notes, and PowerPoint presentations. They attended optional virtual sessions via Skype, and these were planned to accommodate their schedules. Students took their examinations at various centres scattered throughout the region and could complete the program without coming to campus.

Demographic data on online students

The 14 respondents were unevenly distributed across four territories: Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and St. Martin. Some 71% of the sample were between 30 and 49 years old, 14% were below 30, and the remaining 15% were over 50. Ninety-three percent of respondents were females. This was in keeping with the gender imbalance in online education (Hixon et al., 2016; Pribesh et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2010) and in LIS education (Oguz et al., 2015; Rubin, 2016).

Of the participants, 64% were enrolled in the MLIS program and 29% in the MALIS. One student did not respond to this item. All participants were employed full-time, and 93% were studying part-time. This finding contrasts with Hixon et al.'s (2016), as only 64%

Table 2: Reasons for studying online (*N* = 14)

Reasons	Percentage	Number
Job commitment	79	11
Flexibility of the online model	79	11
Family commitment	57	8
Distance from the university	57	8
Degree not available in local area	29	4
It was cost effective	29	4
It suited my learning style	7	1
I am unable to attend class	7	1

of their sample was employed and the majority worked part-time. Hixon et al. studied only undergraduate students, some of whom might be just pursuing their undergraduate degree to join the workforce, hence the variation. Seventy-one percent of the respondents enrolled in 2016, and at the time of this research had completed only one semester in the program. Only 29% of the respondents enrolled in the program in 2015. Astani et al. (2010) found that the number of courses taken by students is likely to influence their perception of online studying. This is a consideration that must be borne in mind when interpreting the findings.

Respondents had a number of reasons for pursuing the degree online. The most popular reasons were flexibility and job commitment as is shown in Table 2.

In keeping with the reasons for studying online advocated by Oguz et al. (2015), an equal percentage of participants (79%) identified job commitment and the flexibility of the online mode. Regional LIS students' reasons for choosing online courses mirrored those of online students elsewhere. Job commitment and flexibility are interrelated, considering that commitment to the job warrants the need for flexibility in the mode of study. The responses to family commitment and distance from the university (57% each) were in keeping with the findings of Harris and Martin (2012), who discovered that family obligations (45%) and distance (51%) were important considerations in choice of study mode. Distance was an important factor in this study for two reasons: 21% of the respondents lived outside of the country in which the library school was located, and others lived in rural areas, in keeping with factors identified by Jaggars (2014).

Eight students ranked their reasons for studying online. Family commitment (ranked first by five students) and job commitment were ranked among the top three reasons by seven students. Considering the high number of females in the program, and given that the majority of these were in their reproductive years, it is understandable why family commitment and flexibility of the online mode would be popular options. Accommodation factors were therefore ranked as most significant factors, as predisposition and selectivity factors did not feature prominently in this study.

Table 3: Characteristics of LIS students (*N* = 14)

Characteristics	Percentage	Number
Interested in learning	100	14
Focused on personal and professional goals	93	13
Persistent	86	12
Confident and humble	71	10
Respect for the educational process	64	9
Inquisitive nature	50	7
Ability to adapt well to change	57	8
An open mind	50	7
Self-direction and self-efficiency	43	6
An online presence	14	2

Characteristics of online learners

The literature advocates that online students possess characteristics that make them more likely to succeed (Dabbagh, 2007). Students were asked to indicate the characteristics that best described them. Table 3 shows their responses.

The entire sample indicated that they had an interest in learning. Following closely on that, 93% indicated that they were focused on personal and professional goals. Regional LIS graduate students exhibited seven of the 10 characteristics of online learners identified by onlinecollege.org (2011). Self-direction and self-efficacy (43%) and online presence (14%) were the least popular characteristics. The small number of students indicating an online presence can be considered characteristic of the age group, since the majority of these were between 30 and 49 years old, and age is a variable in technology use (A. Smith, 2014).

Program evaluation

Ninety-three percent of the participants had positive comments to make about the course materials, and this compares favourably with 90% in King's (2014) research. Seventy-nine percent of this number used the word "useful" to describe the course materials. In terms of negative perceptions, two students expressed that there was "difficulty" in gaining access to course resources such as textbooks. At the time of writing, the library school was in the process of procuring additional resources for the program, including electronic texts. One student noted that there was a difference in the resources provided among courses. They stated that some lecturers used more YouTube videos than others. This could be due in part to the nature of the different courses. Another issue was "broken link provided for required reading," echoing the findings from Yang and Cornelius (2004) and Bissessar (2014). This may be due to the dynamic nature of electronic resources, which can frequently change location.

Participants viewed course interaction as impactful. They participated in the online sessions, and 46% indicated that this contributed positively to their performance. One participant spoke of the "convenience of being in class yet not having to physically be in the classroom." There was also a social aspect to the interactions, as one participant mentioned the opportunity to "share with others outside the island" and "experience the different cultures." In this study, participants reported high levels of learner–lecturer interaction, as in the research conducted by Bissessar (2014) and King (2014), and high levels of learner–learner interaction as discussed by Bissessar. One theme emerging from the responses was the difference in the online presence of lecturers, and this was reported by Burns (2013, p. 7), who noted that students' levels of satisfaction with lecturer online presence varied from course to course. This difference was observed by 31% of the participants in this study. However, students with a face-to-face mindset might not have been prepared for the limited lecturer–learner interaction online. This might explain the reason Jaggars (2014, p. 6) found that "almost all students noted that the nature of the student–instructor interaction was more 'distant,' less 'personal,' less 'immediate,' less 'detailed,' or less 'solid' online."

Participants indicated that technology was used in a variety of ways including: Our-VLE, access to the library catalogue, preparation and delivery of presentations, Skype voice and video calls for online sessions, instructional videos to support lessons, email, and e-books and online journals. These were in keeping with practices elsewhere in the Caribbean (Bissessar, 2014). Generally, it was stated that "technology aided greatly with online sessions," a finding supported by Yang and Cornelius (2004) and Bissessar (2014). Students believed technology was both "useful and interactive." The online environment was beneficial to participants, and one reported that she had "become more advanced in using technology [as she had to] adapt," a finding also reported by Astani et al. (2010).

Ninety-three percent of the respondents indicated that the course assignments were helpful in various ways. They served to reinforce concepts, provide a better understanding of what was taught, and shed light on course content. One of the shortfalls of the assignments as perceived by one student was a need for "prior exposure to some of the formats required for the assignments." The

item on feedback generated mixed responses from participants, as was the case in the literature reviewed (King, 2014; Smidt et al., 2014). Some indicated that the feedback received in some instances was "helpful and 'eye opening,'" as it was "in-depth and allowed [them] to understand where [they] went wrong." Others noted that timely feedback provided them with the opportunity to "make adjustments or use the feedback to prepare the next assignment" so as to formulate "better assignments in the future." One student noted that the quality of the feedback provided was "extremely useful not only for the course at hand, but for overall development," concurring with King (2014). On the other hand, the timeliness of the feedback seemed to vary, as one student noted, "some lecturers did better in this area than some," and another supported this by saying, "for some courses feedback was more timely than others."

Skill development

Enrolment in the online program resulted in the development of a range of skills for the participants. These included both technological and cognitive skills. Twenty-one percent

of the participants indicated that their technology skills developed as a result of technology used for online sessions and to produce assignments, a conclusion supported by Astani et al. (2010). The use of technology also resulted in "improved online presence," and another reported, "I am now familiar with using course management systems and Skype." Cognitive skills developed during the program included analytical, interpretive, research, and critical thinking skills. Research skill development was reported by 21% of the participants. Students also reported the development of life skills such as time management, and discipline in "managing work, school and other responsibilities." These skills were important in helping students perform at an acceptable level in the program. The program met the expectation of 86% of the respondents and surpassed the expectation of one individual (7%). Thirty-six percent noted that it afforded them the flexibility that they needed, a recurrent theme in the literature (Astani et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2012; Smidt et al, 2014; Yang & Cornelius, 2004).

Recommending the program

All respondents stated that they would encourage others to pursue the program online. One participant succinctly summed this up: "Online study allows one to tackle other obligations such as work, personal time, and family life. It gives flexibility, avoids stress from traffic and related expenses. If time can be managed well, it may be the best option." Other reasons given for recommending online study included the exposure to technology and enhanced communication with students across the region. Bissessar's (2014) study also supports this finding. One element that came out in the responses was that face to face is still viewed as a better option to online, as participants considered the online as a default mode that should be pursued only when the desired mode is unavailable, a finding supported by the literature (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999; Stewart et al., 2010). Burns (2013, p. 7) agrees: "students . . . perceived online courses to be most convenient and traditional courses to be most conducive to their learning style."

Challenges that affected performance

Challenges experienced by participants were categorized as personal and program related. Personal challenges included poor health, unreliable Internet access, selecting too many courses, and work-related stress. Selection of too many courses might be related to the finding that students were working and studying at the same time. The major program-related challenge was lack of timely feedback (29%). Submission dates for assignments was another challenge, as indicated by 14% of the participants. The concern was that assignments for different courses were due about the same time and students had to be working on several pieces of an assignment simultaneously. Although assignments were posted the first day of the semester, some assignments could not be done until students got their grounding in the course. Participants also perceived that they did not get adequate administrative support. Given that they were online and were not able to come to campus to get information and resolve issues related to the programme, they had to resort to sending emails and making telephone calls. However, they reported that sometimes calls and emails were not answered, or when they were the responses were delayed.

Factors that contributed to success

Students highlighted several factors that positively affected their performance. Half of the respondents spoke of the role of lecturers in providing assistance. Words such as "care and concern," "dedicated," and "helpful" were used to describe faculty. Seventy-one percent of the respondents gave commendation because lecturers "took interest in the students' performance, questions and concerns"; were accessible; "had the students' best interest at heart"; and provided links to additional course resources. Lecturers were also commended for feedback that "suggested specific ways students could improve." Faculty were commended by 29% of the respondents for offering the program online, as it was not "offered anywhere else in the region." The cost-effectiveness of the program was also commended. Other factors that positively affected performance included online interactions, presentations, and the resources posted online, which created a "solid foundation for further reading."

Suggestions for improvement

The suggestions for improvements were varied. In terms of how the program was organized, students suggested that records management needed to be included in the MALIS and MLIS program, even though a separate degree existed in this specialization. This could be attributed to the fact that some librarians in the region were also responsible for managing the institutions' records. Students believed that courses were unevenly distributed across semesters, noting that one course could be removed from semester two and placed in semester one. Another student felt that courses such as ICT should be offered in the summer, when students could get more "hands-on" experiences, given that the majority were teachers. Respondents also suggested that more e-resources needed to be included on the reading list and "selected textbooks should be more accessible for online students." Feedback was also mentioned as an area needing to be improved.

Conclusion

Respondents" reasons for studying online were the same as those identified in the literature. They were unable to access face-to-face classes due to job and family commitments, so the flexibility of the online mode gave them the ability to fulfil their job and family obligations while pursuing personal and professional goals. The distance from the university was also identified as an important factor for choosing online education. LIS graduate students exhibited seven of the 10 qualities that the literature says were likely to result in success in online learning (Onlinecollege.com, 2011). They were highly interested in learning, were focused on personal and professional goals; were persistent; had respect for the educational process; were confident and humble; were adaptable to change; and had an inquisitive nature and an open mind. Students did not perceive themselves as possessing self-direction and self-efficacy, and they believed they lacked the online presence considered important for success in online learning.

Participants were generally positive about their online experience, a finding shared by Fedynich, Bradley, and Bradley (2015). They found course outlines, lecture notes, and electronic resources relevant and useful but had challenges gaining access to textbooks. In addition, they mentioned the differences in the types of resources provided by lecturers.

Students believed that both lecturer–learner and learner–learner interaction contributed in a positive way to their overall performance. These interactions provided clarity and exposure to varying perspectives and opportunities for them to share with others outside the island. However, they noted that some lecturers were more frequently present in the online environment than others.

Technology use for online learning in this research was in keeping with the findings of the literature: for online sessions, communication between participants, and preparation of assignments (Bissessar, 2014). The use of technology facilitated the attainment of course objectives and also helped participants develop their technology skills. Course assignments were generally perceived as useful in helping to achieve the course objectives, as they served to reinforce concepts, provide a better understanding of what was taught, and facilitate a better grasp of course content. Participants' perception of the feedback received from lecturers was mixed but was for the most part positive.

Participants believed the online program led to the development of technological, cognitive, and life skills such as time management and discipline. They indicated that the online program met or surpassed their expectations. It afforded them the flexibility they needed, facilitated participation in class discussions, and included constant communication with the lecturers. All respondents were willing to recommend the online program, but some felt this should be considered only in the case where the face-to-face option was not feasible, indicating that students still felt that face-to-face classes were the preferred mode.

Students had personal challenges such as health issues, work stress, and program-related challenges, for example, delayed feedback and close submission dates for assignments. On the other hand, they believed their performance was positively impacted by the support and assistance from lecturers and feedback that could be used to improve submissions. The participants felt that lecturers were to be commended for offering the programs online, for being accessible, and for providing support to students.

The researcher believes that the programs could be improved in the following ways to increase students' satisfaction. The library school is encouraged to continue to provide robust and ongoing orientation to students who come into the program with no experience of the online environment and possibly unrealistic expectations. In addition, it needs to identify the best practices among lecturers and replicate these in the other courses, providing the administrative support requested by students. This should decrease the obvious differences students observe among courses. Finally, the department could obtain electronic copies of required textbooks so students are able to access these virtually. Where electronic versions of required texts are not available, the option of using open-source resources that are relevant to the courses could be explored and implemented if this is viable.

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