



Employer and Student Perceptions of Distance Education and Studying at OUHK

(Summary of the full report)

**Centre for Research in Distance & Adult Learning
and
Public Affairs Unit
(Commissioned by OUHK Council)**

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Summary

This project investigated the perceptions held by employers, OUHK students and OUHK graduates about distance education in general and OUHK in particular with respect to meeting professional employment requirements in Hong Kong. Two sets of bilingual questionnaires were developed, one for employers and one for students and graduates, and were administered by mail, followed by telephone reminders. 488 employer questionnaires and 2,558 student questionnaires were completed. Of the employer group, 269 were from the voluntary/education and government sector, 210 were from the commercial sector, and 10 did not specify.

- Seventy per cent of the employers agreed that the OUHK's open entry to university education is acceptable.
- More than 90% agreed that the advantages to an organisation of the staff studying through the distance learning mode are continuity of staff at work, and continuous professional development of staff.
- There were no aspects on which the employers group rated distance education as 'not very helpful'.

From the students' and graduates' questionnaire, several observations can be made.

- More than 70% of the students and graduates rated their education through OUHK between 'helpful' and 'extremely helpful' in a range of areas including general job skills, motivation to improve work performance, confidence at work, and interest in further education to acquire further work-related skills.
- More than 60% of the students and graduates rated between 'helpful' and 'extremely helpful' the benefits to their specific/technical job skills and ability to relate to professional colleagues.
- Eighty per cent said that study at OUHK had been beneficial to their professional development, and 90% said it had been beneficial to their personal development. These benefits appeared to be more important for them than career advancement (59%) and job change (53%).

Employer and student groups were both asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 10, the skills that they regard as the most important for a graduate employee.

- The skill rated the highest by the employer group was problem-solving, followed by logical reasoning, team skills, self-discipline and presentation and communication skills.
- The students and graduates rated logical reasoning the highest of the skills they consider to be important for a university graduate, followed by problem-solving skills, presentation skills, communication skills and team skills.
- Eighty-four per cent of the students and graduates rated their OUHK courses from 'helpful' to 'extremely helpful' in developing their ability to use problem-solving skills, 73% their ability to engage in creative thinking and 70% their basic communication skills.

This is the first known study about employers' perceptions of graduates of distance education universities in Asia. It is anticipated that the outcomes of this investigation will have significant implications for future planning as OUHK continues its growth as the Centre for Excellence in Distance and Adult Learning in the Asia-Pacific Region.

Introduction

Recent research, worldwide, has suggested that many employers are satisfied with but not enthusiastic about most of the graduates they employ (Harvey, 1993; Hinde, 1997). Generally, the areas in which they have been the most satisfied have included co-operation, motivation, commitment, drive and energy, desire to achieve and dependability (Harvey, 1993; Hinde, 1997). On the other hand, some studies have reported that employers have been less satisfied with important personal and interpersonal skills such as communication, common sense, time management (Mullen, 1997), and basic commercial/financial awareness (Harvey, 1993; Utley, 1997). Even though employers did not necessarily rate prior knowledge of the job and relevant work experience as high priorities for graduates, they have reported being less than satisfied with graduates' performances in these areas (Harvey, 1993; Utley, 1997).

In Hong Kong a survey conducted by the Chamber of Commerce in 1990 (Winters, 1992) found that employers had similar requirements and expectations to those identified in the overseas studies. High on the list of priorities for Hong Kong employers was proficiency in spoken and written English. Other Hong Kong studies (Born, 1997; Bridgewater, 1994; Wright, 1988) have indicated an overall level of dissatisfaction with graduates. More recently, a study by the City University of Hong Kong was conducted in September 1998 on 1,000 commercial organizations. They found that the top consideration when hiring an employee was work experience (24%). However, the commercial employers emphasized work ethics, initiative and communication skills as the three most important qualities in the employees (Ming Pao, 13 August 1999).

Most of the studies mentioned above have been mainly in the business or telecommunications and engineering fields. No data have been collected in comprehensive, general terms and no studies have considered graduates who have studied through distance learning.

Furthermore, until recently, the quality of instruction and hence the graduates of distance education institutions have been regarded as being of inferior quality to traditional institutions (Bates 1995). This is despite evidence cited by writers such as Keegan (1990) that distance education and traditional institutions have been demonstrated to be equal in terms of products. Even with the worldwide acceptance that this is just a myth, it may well be that employers in Hong Kong still have doubts about the quality of OUHK graduates.

There was therefore a need to carry out this study for many reasons. The first of these was to clarify the community's perceptions about studying through distance education. If, as mentioned above, employers in the Hong Kong community perceive distance education graduates in general, and OUHK graduates in particular, as being of a different standard than graduates of traditional universities, then it is important to establish the nature of their perceptions so that any misconceptions can be addressed. If this is the case, then it is imperative to identify any particular characteristics of distance education (and specifically OUHK graduates) that may or may not be compatible with employers' needs, in order to explore ways in which OUHK can enhance its contribution to the workforce. If, on the

other hand, employers in Hong Kong see OUHK graduates as being of equal or higher standards than other university graduates, then this outcome will produce a compelling argument to support the growth of distance education.

For the reasons outlined above, the specific research questions of this study were:

1. What do employers in Hong Kong perceive to be their most important requirements of graduate employees?
2. Do employers of OUHK graduates believe that distance education is an appropriate mode of learning for their employees?
3. Do employers of OUHK graduates believe that they are of comparable quality to graduates of other universities in Hong Kong?
4. Do employers of OUHK graduates value OUHK study to the extent that they would undertake it themselves or recommend it to others?

In order to provide comparative data about graduates' perceptions of the preparation received in their OUHK courses, the following parallel questions were asked:

1. How do OUHK students/graduates perceive the quality of their preparation for employment?
2. Do OUHK graduates believe that distance education is an appropriate mode of learning?
3. Do OUHK graduates believe that they are of comparable quality to graduates of other universities in Hong Kong?
4. Do OUHK graduates value distance study to the extent that they would undertake it again or recommend it to others?

Methodology

Two sets of bilingual questionnaires were developed, one for employers and one for students and graduates, and were distributed by mail, with postage-paid return envelopes. This was then followed by telephone reminders.

The employers' questionnaire contained 41 items focusing on:

1. perceptions of distance education and knowledge of any students who have studied by distance education (5-point Likert-type scale),
2. importance attached to basic personal, interpersonal and work-related skills as a part of university education (5-point Likert-type scale),
3. personal, interpersonal and work-related skills required of graduate employees (ranked in order of importance from 10 to 1)
4. for those who were employers of OUHK students or graduates, their perceptions of distance education and the quality of their OUHK graduate employees (5-point Likert-type scale), and
5. evaluation of their OUHK graduate employees with respect to personal, inter-personal and work-related skills (5-point Likert-type scale).

The student/graduate questionnaire focused on:

1. evaluation of the extent to which OUHK has helped them to develop a range of personal, inter-personal and job-related skills, and the extent to which they recommend studying at OUHK (5-point Likert-type scale),
2. professional, personal and career-related benefits of studying at OUHK (5-point Likert-type scale),
3. perceptions of the equivalence of OUHK degrees to degrees from other universities (5-point Likert-type scale),
4. effects of OUHK courses on career developments (tick the appropriate item),
5. importance attached to basic personal, interpersonal and work-related skills as a part of university education (5-point Likert-type scale),
6. personal, interpersonal and work-related skills required of graduate employees (ranked in order of importance from 10 to 1)

Sample

A total of 488 employers and 2558 students responded to the questionnaires. Of the employer group, 269 were from the voluntary/education and government sector, 210 were from the commercial sector, and 10 did not specify.

Results

Part I: Employers

1.1 Employers' perceptions of distance education and OUHK education

Seventy per cent agreed that the OUHK's open entry to university education is acceptable .

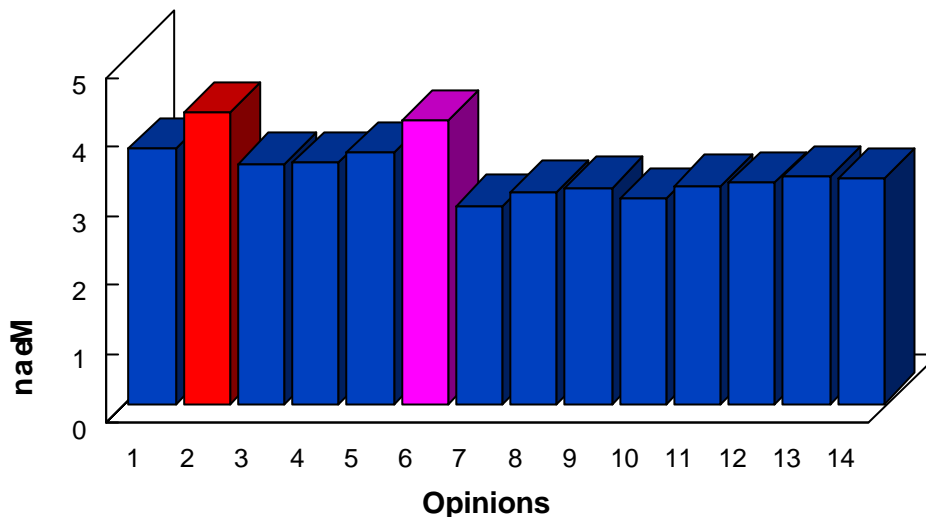
More than 90% agreed that the advantages to an organisation of the staff studying through the distance learning mode are continuity of staff at work and continuous professional development of staff.

Around 60% also agreed that there are less financial burdens on the organisation if the staff are studying by distance mode and the ease of personnel management and immediate application of skills acquired by staff are other advantages.

40.6% agreed or strongly agreed that, given the choice, they would prefer their staff members to enhance their professional development through distance education.

Table 1.1 : Employers' perceptions of distance education and OUHK

	% who agreed/strongly agreed	% who disagreed/strongly disagreed
OUHK's open entry to university education is acceptable	70.1	18.3
advantage to staff studying OUHK degree is continuity	96.3	1.9
advantage to staff studying OUHK degree is financial	60.6	11.5
advantage to staff studying OUHK degree is ease of personnel management	59.8	9.4
advantage to staff studying OUHK degree is immediate workplace application of skills acquired by staff	61.5	3.5
advantage to staff studying OUHK degree is continuous professional development of staff	92.9	1.4
distance learning as good as tradition face-to-face mode	26.6	36.6
prefer staff to enhance professional development through distance education	40.6	31.6
quality of knowledge acquired through distance education is lower than that acquired through traditional mode	34.6	20.5
personal preference to study for a degree through distance education	35.4	32.6



Key to values on x-axis:

- 1 OUHK' s open entry acceptable
- 2 advantage: continuity
- 3 advantage: financial
- 4 advantage:ease of personnel management
- 5 advantage: skills application
- 6 advantage: continuous professional development
- 7 distance learning as good as traditional mode
- 8 prefer staff to enhance professional development through distance education
- 9 quality of knowledge lower than traditional mode
- 10 personal preference to study through distance education
- 11 would recommend distance education o others
- 12 would recommend OUHK
- 13 would recommend conventional university
- 14 prefer to employ a conventional university graduate

Figure 1.1: Employers' mean ratings of benefits of distance education

1.2 Skills regarded as important for graduate employees

Employer and student groups were both asked to rank, on a scale from 1 to 10, the skills that they regard as the most important for a graduate employee, where 10 was the most important. For the employer group, these rankings are shown in Figure 1.2 The skill rated the highest by the employer group was problem-solving, followed by logical reasoning, team skills, self-discipline and presentation and communication skills. Content specific skills, including mathematics, basic computing and management were all rated by employers as being less important for graduate employees.

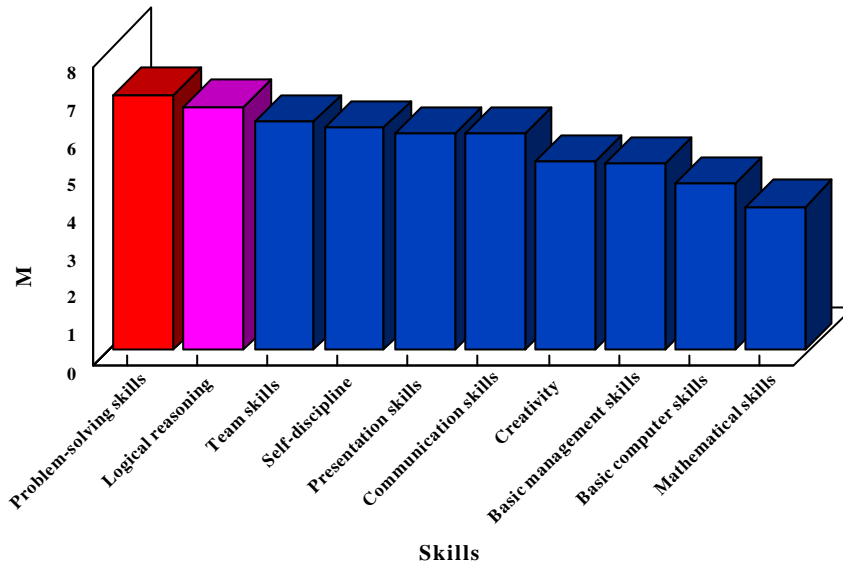


Figure 1.2: Employers' mean rankings of skills important for a graduate employee

The employers were also asked to rate each of these skills on a five-point scale according to the level of importance they placed on each one as a necessary part of university education. Details of these ratings are shown in Figure 1.3 and Table 1.2.

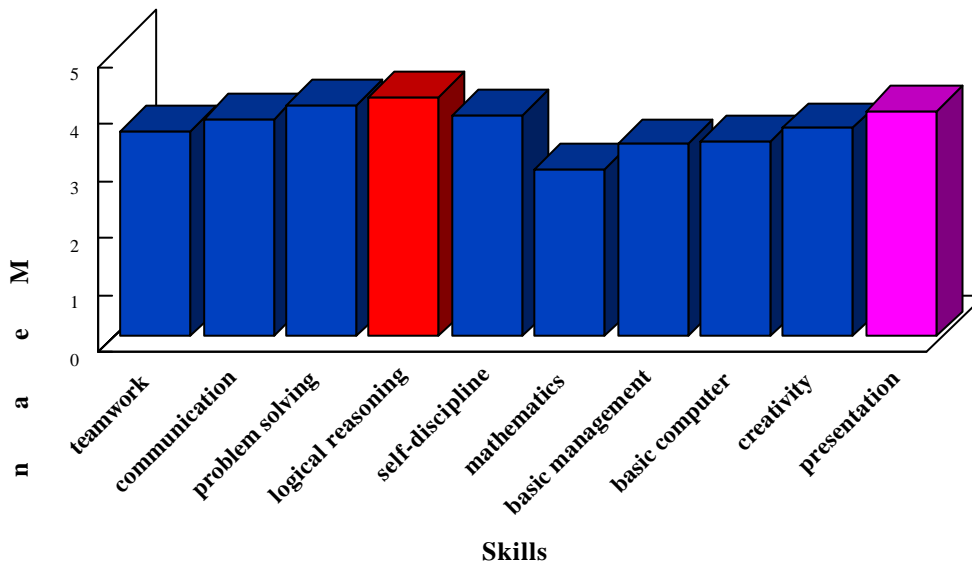


Figure 1.3: Employers' mean ratings of skills important for a university education

Clearly, the majority of employees thought that all of these skills are important components of a university education. The ones regarded as very/extremely important by the largest percentages of respondents included logical reasoning, problem-solving, communication, self-discipline, presentation and team skills. Fewer gave high ratings to basic skills in the areas of mathematics, management and computer.

Table 1.2: Employers' perceptions of skills important for a university education

Skill	% who rated as not at all/not very important	% who rated as average importance	% who rated as very/extremely important
Team skills	8.6	39.8	50.4
Communication skills	4.1	30.1	64.2
Problem-solving skills	0.4	23.6	74.4
Logical reasoning	0.4	14.8	83.6
Self- discipline	4.7	27.9	65.2
Mathematical skills	25.6	55.1	16.4
Basic management skills	7.2	53.9	36.9
Basic computer skills	7.0	50.4	40.8
Creativity	6.3	37.9	54.3
Presentation skills	1.4	24.6	72.5

There were 184 employers who indicated that they were employers of OUHK graduates. These employers rated their OUHK graduates highly on diligence, perseverance, willingness to learn and general job skills.

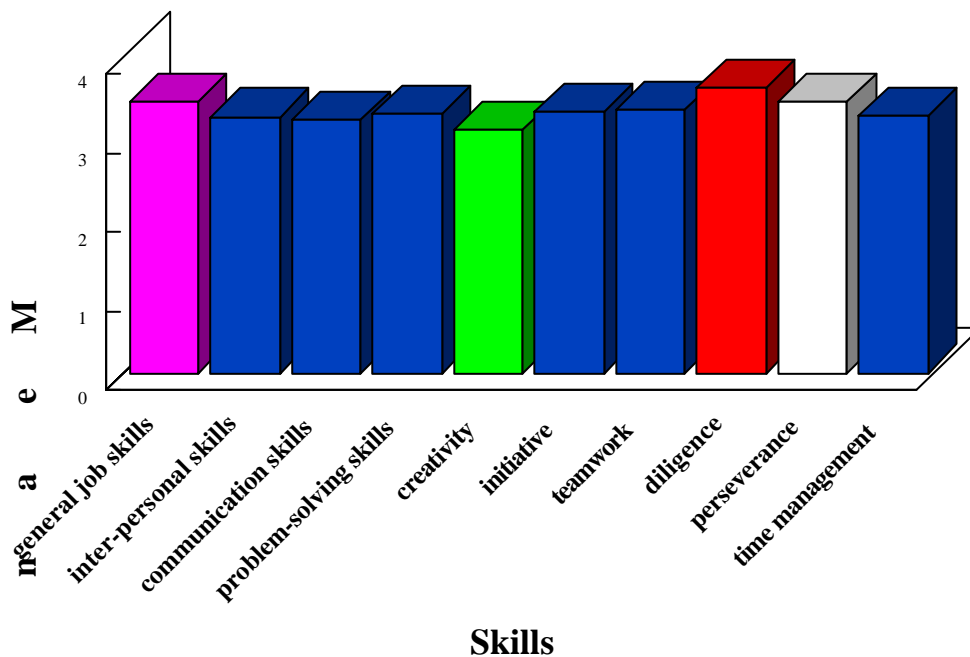
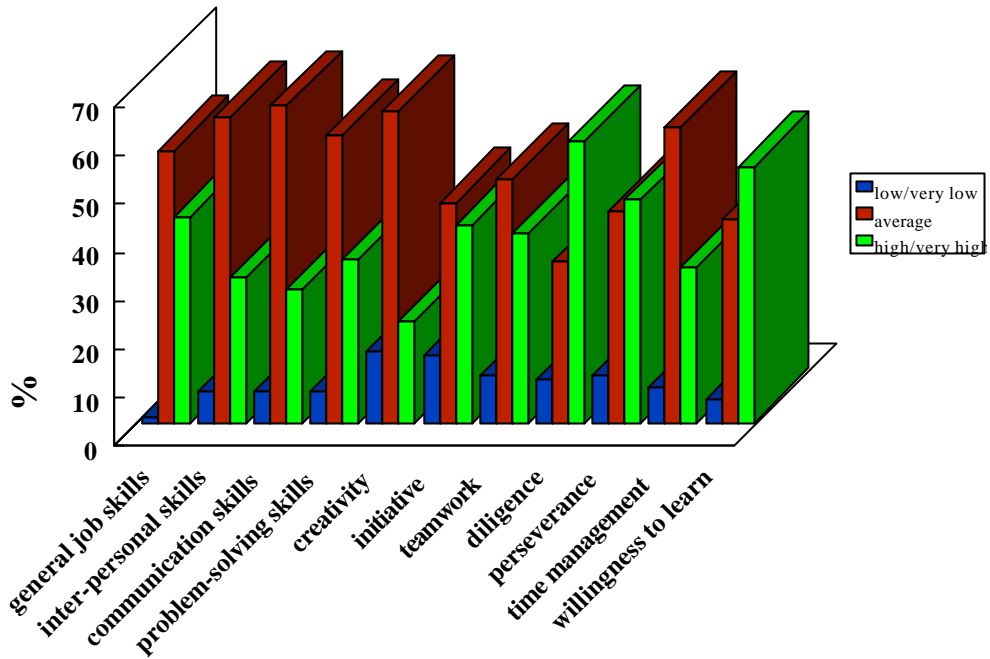


Figure 1.4: Employers of OUHK graduates' mean ratings of these employees' skills



Skills

Figure 1.5: Employers of Ouhk graduates' ratings of these employees' skills

1.3 Employers of Ouhk graduates' perceptions of distance education

The 184 employers who indicated that they had Ouhk graduates amongst their employees were asked to answer four further questions about their knowledge and perceptions of distance education. A total of 82.5% said they knew about distance education before their employee/s enrolled at Ouhk. However, 49.7% agreed that they knew much more about distance education after their employee/s enrolled at Ouhk. As is indicated in Figure 1.5, this group of employers was uncertain about whether or not the quality of their Ouhk graduate employee/s was comparable to graduates of other universities in Hong Kong.

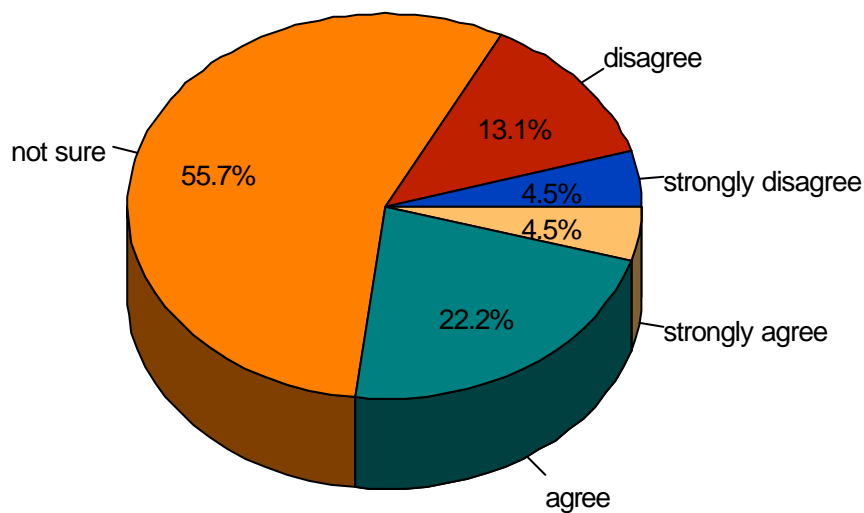


Figure 1.6: Employers of Ouhk graduates' perceptions of graduates' quality compared to graduates of other universities in Hong Kong

Similarly, most of the employers were uncertain about whether or not they would study through OUHK if they were to undertake the same degree as the employee did (Figure 1.6)

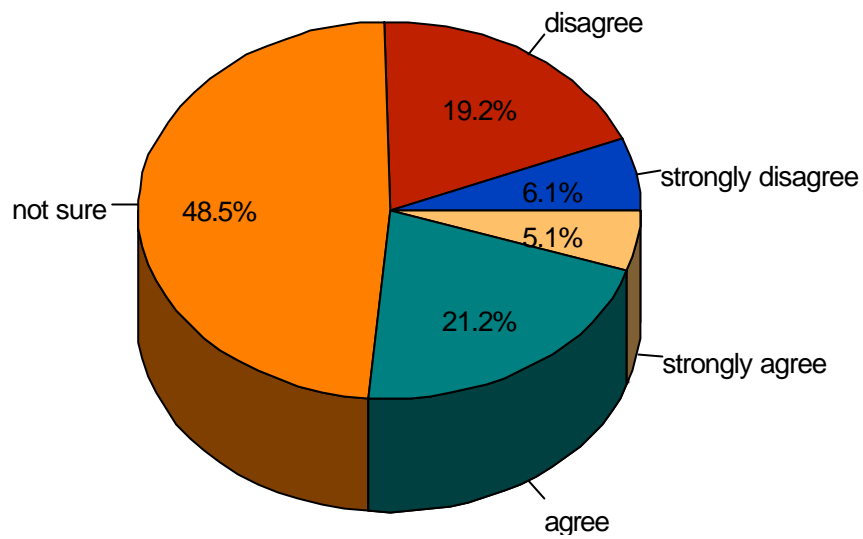


Figure 1.7: Employers of OUHK graduates' perceptions of whether they would study for the same degree through OUHK

Part II: Students and Graduates

2.1 Evaluation of the extent to which OUHK has helped develop a range of personal, inter-personal and job-related skills

Table 2.1 indicates the extent to which the OUHK students and graduates perceived their education through OUHK to have helped them to develop certain aspects related to their careers. Their mean ratings on each of these items are shown in Figure 2.1.

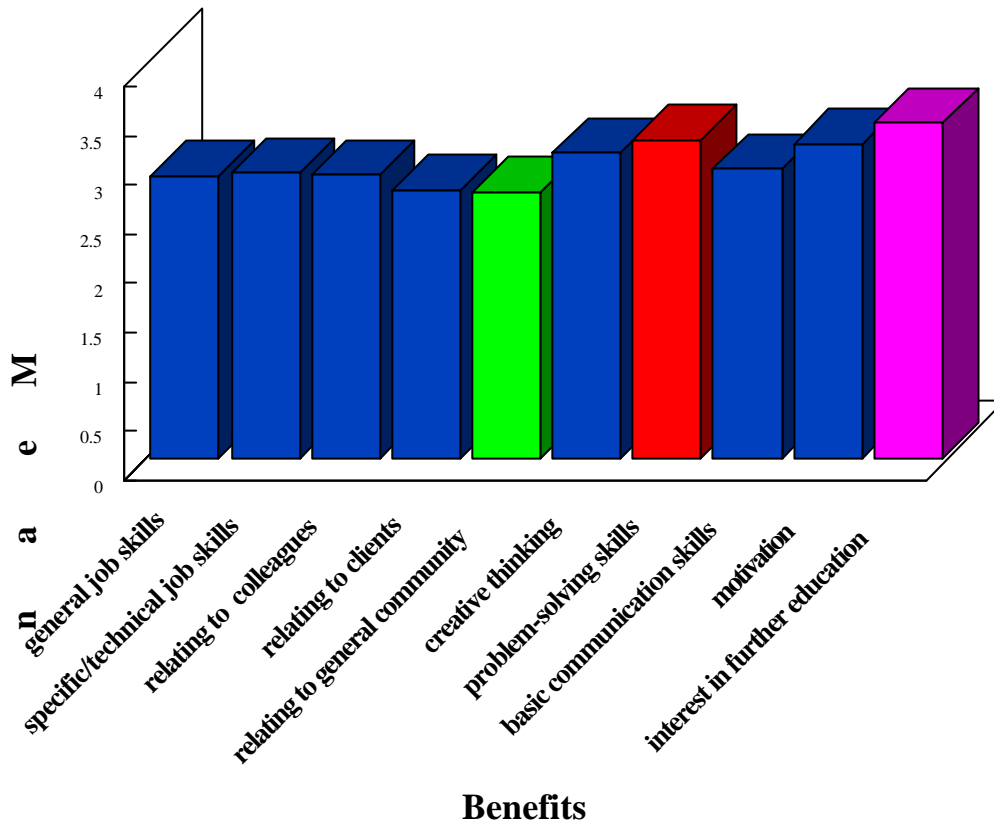


Figure 2.1: Students/graduates' mean ratings of benefits of OUHK course/s to their careers

More than 70% of the students and graduates rated their education through OUHK as being of average or above-average helpfulness in a range of areas including general job skills, motivation to improve work performance, confidence at work, and interest in further education to acquire further work-related skills. More than 60% of the students and graduates rated as average or above-average helpfulness the benefits to their specific/technical job skills and ability to relate to professional colleagues.

Table 2.1 : Students/graduates' perceptions of benefits of OUHK course/s to their careers

Skill	% who rated as not at all/not very helpful	% who rated as average helpfulness	% who rated as very/extremely helpful
general job skills	24.3	55.9	13.4
specific/technical job skills	27.2	44.8	19.5
ability to relate to professional colleagues	27.5	45.5	18.8
ability to relate to clients	31.4	37.2	12.3
ability to relate to the general community	33.3	39.7	11.8
ability to engage in creative thinking	20.0	44.8	27.9
ability to use problem-solving skills	13.1	51.0	33.3
basic communication skills	24.4	49.5	20.0
motivation to improve work performance	16.8	46.4	33.1
interest in further education to acquire/enhance skills needed at work	11.6	41.3	43.5
confidence at work	12.4	47.6	37.7
computer skills	35.6	35.3	13.6

2.2 Extent to which students and graduates recommend studying at OUHK

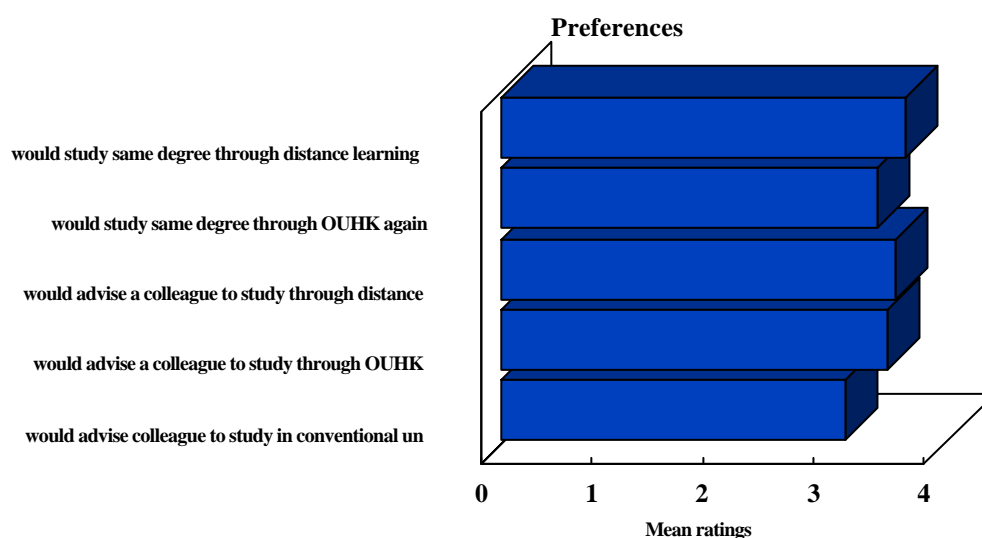


Figure 2.2 Students'/graduates' mean ratings of recommendations to study by distance education

Table 2.2: Extent to which students/graduates would recommend study by distance education

	% who disagreed/ strongly disagreed	% unsure	% who agreed/strongly agreed
would study same degree through distance learning again	8.7	28.3	62.2
would study same degree through OUHK again	11.0	41.6	46.6
would advise a colleague to study through distance learning	7.8	34.3	56.6
would advise a colleague to study through OUHK	7.8	39.3	51.9
would advise a colleague to study through a conventional university	14.9	58.0	24.5

It appears that the majority of students and graduates would study through distance learning if they were to study the same degree again. The majority also indicated that they would advise a colleague to study through distance learning and, specifically, through OUHK. The mean rating of 2.12 for the final item in this set indicated that they would probably not advise a colleague to study through a conventional university in preference to distance education.

2.3 Professional, personal and career-related benefits of studying at OUHK

Seventy-one per cent of the students and graduates said that their education through OUHK had been related to their careers. Eighty per cent said that study at OUHK had been beneficial to their professional development, and 90% said it had been beneficial to their personal development.

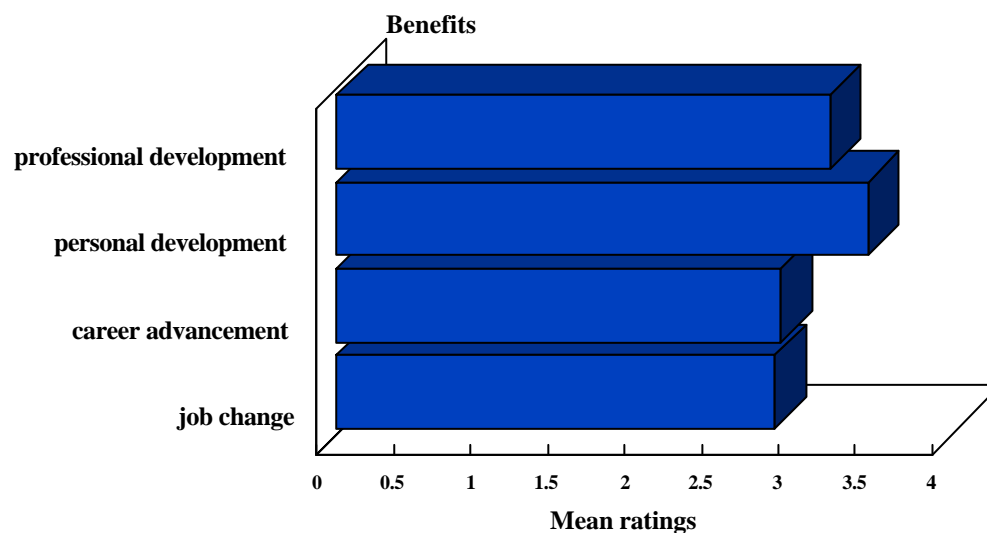


Figure 2.3: Students'/graduates' mean ratings of benefits of study at OUHK

Table 2.3: Extent to which students/graduates perceived themselves to have benefitted from study at OUHK

	% who did not benefit	% who had some benefit	% who had great/enormous benefit
professional development	14.7	49.5	30.4
personal development	7.6	44.4	45.0
career advancement	32.8	39.0	19.7
job change	30.2	37.6	15.8

2.4 Perceptions of equivalence of OUHK degrees to those from other universities

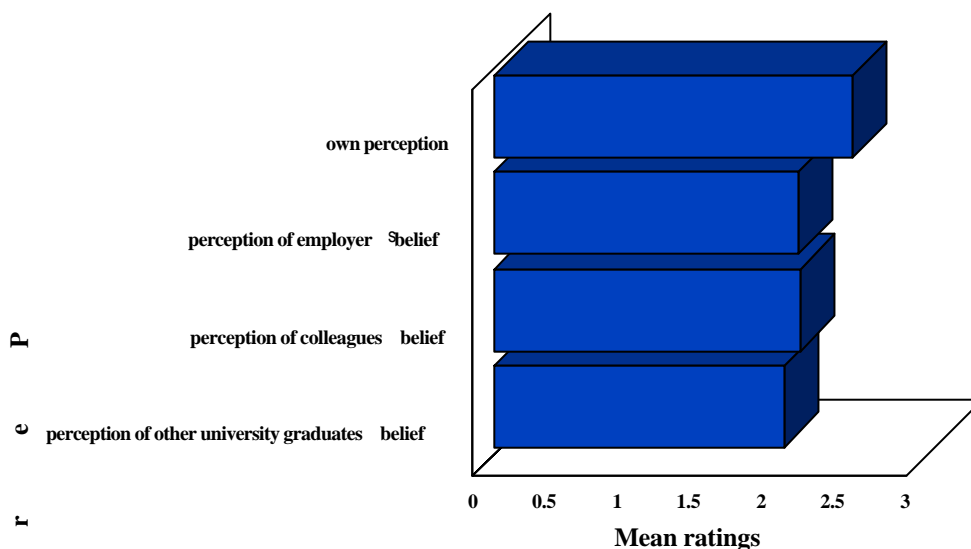


Figure 2.4: Students'/graduates' mean ratings of OUHK's equivalence to other university degrees

Table 2.4: Extent to which students/graduates perceived OUHK degrees to be equivalent to degrees from other universities

	% unsure	% who see it as lower standard than others	% who see it as equivalent to others	% who see it as higher standard than others
student's own perception	4.8	42.0	50.8	0.8
student's perception of employer's belief	19.3	48.5	29.0	0.1
student's perception of colleagues' belief	15.7	54.7	26.9	0.4
student's perception of other university graduates' belief	17.2	62.8	17.7	0.2

Only 51.6% of the students and graduates said that they believe an OUHK degree to be of equivalent to or higher standard than other universities (Table 2.4). The majority were pessimistic about others' opinions, saying that they believed their employers, their colleagues and other university graduates regarded an OUHK degree as of a lower standard than degrees of other universities.

2.5 Effects of OUHK courses on career developments

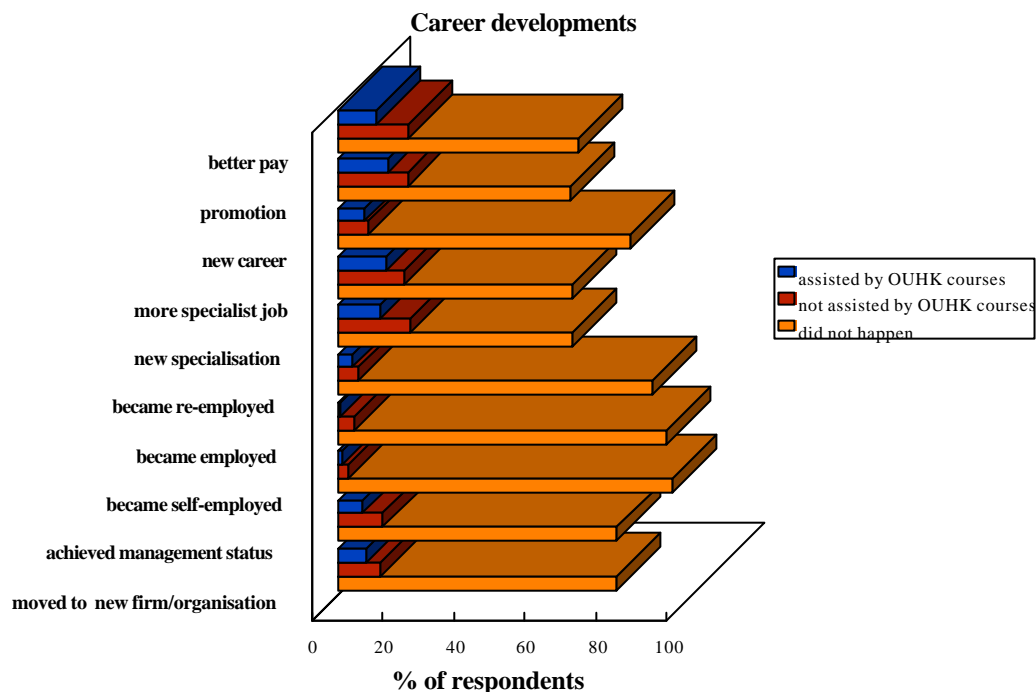


Figure 2.5: Extent to which students/graduates perceived OUHK courses to have influenced career developments

There were not many instances of any of the above events occurring. Approximately 30% of the students experienced a switch of specialisation with their occupations or a change to a more specialised job. However, only 11.8% and 13.2% respectively attributed these changes to their OUHK courses.

2.6 Skills regarded as important for graduate employees:

From Figure 2.6 it can be seen that the students and graduates rated logical reasoning the highest of the skills they consider to be important for a university graduate, followed by problem-solving skills, presentation skills, communication skills, and team skills. Eighty-four per cent of the students and graduates rated their OUHK courses from 'helpful' to 'extremely helpful' in developing their ability to use problem-solving skills, 73% their ability to engage in creative thinking and 70% their basic communication skills

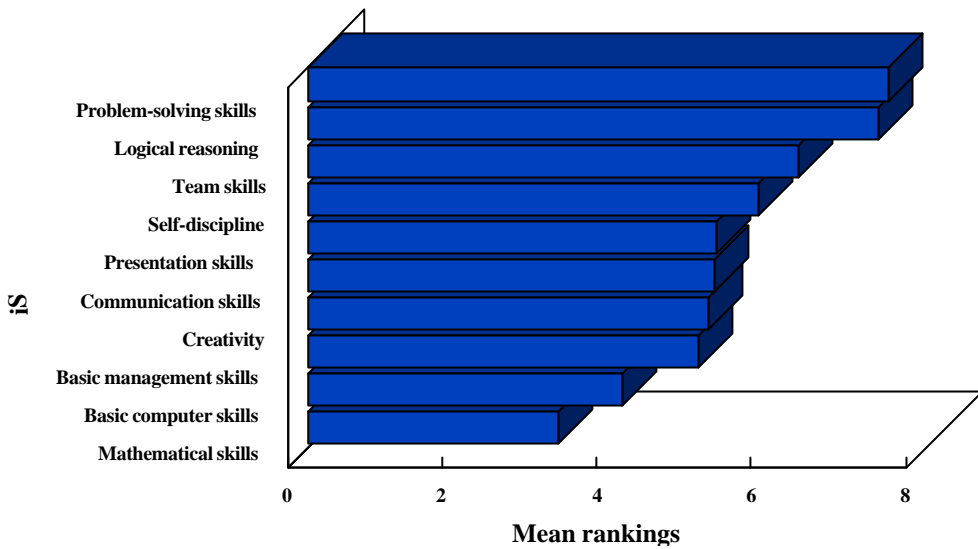


Figure 2.6: Students’ mean rankings of skills important for a graduate employee

The students were also asked to rate each of these skills on a five-point scale according to the level of importance they placed on each one as a necessary part of university education. Details of these ratings are shown in Figure 2.7 and Table 2.5.

As a necessary part of a university education, more than 70% of the students and graduates rated problem-solving, logical reasoning and presentation skills as very or extremely important. Around 50% rated self-discipline, communication skills and creativity as very or extremely important.

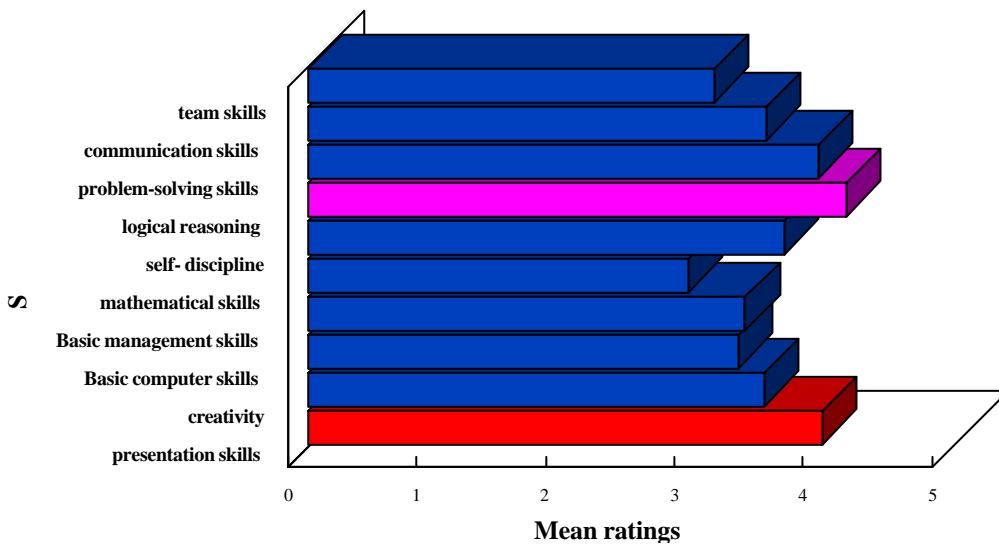


Figure 2.7: Students/graduates’ mean ratings of skills important for a university education

Table 2.5: Students/graduates' perceptions of skills important for a university education

Skill	% who rated as not at all/not very important	% who rated as average importance	% who rated as very/extremely important
team skills	22.5	43.5	31.4
communication skills	9.3	39.1	49.2
problem-solving skills	2.2	26.3	70.5
logical reasoning	1.1	18.4	79.6
self- discipline	9.4	33.2	55.4
mathematical skills	24.4	53.1	17.5
Basic management skills	9.5	48.2	39.4
Basic computer skills	11.1	50.3	35.1
creativity	10.7	38.0	48.9
presentation skills	2.6	24.5	71.7

Conclusion

The outcomes of this project have made a significant contribution to knowledge about distance education in Asia for the following reasons:

- it has considered a broad cross-section of employers from both government and commercial sectors, as distinct from specific groups considered in the majority of previous studies of employer perceptions,
- it is the first Asian study of which we are aware that has considered the perceptions of employers of graduates of a distance education institution, and also sought the perceptions of its students and graduates, and
- it has sought community understanding of and perception about the concept of open and distance learning in contemporary times.

It is anticipated that the outcomes of this investigation will have significant implications for future planning as OUHK continues its growth as the Centre for Excellence in Distance and Adult Learning in the Asia-Pacific Region.