

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IN OPEN LEARNING: THE CASE OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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Introduction

Balance to be struck among the different functions that universities are expected to perform, has been a perennial issue for discussion. While the Oxbridge model notably placed stress on teaching and research, gradually as social change and transformation came to be accepted as a broad aim of education, service to society was added on as a function of universities. Universities' role in research is interwoven with their task of teaching. Research is considered as a vital process for investigating scientific and social issues pertinent to academic disciplines and was thus envisaged to enrich and make teaching relevant for the learner. As recruitment and career advancement was directly dependent on research and publications produced by academics in the university system, research continues to be given high priority in universities. Higher educational institutions which sacrifice research and confine themselves to teaching would thus find themselves doomed to sterility and stultification.

Especially in the developing world, research assumes even greater significance, due to the North-South disparities in the production of knowledge. Due to their lower contribution to the knowledge industry, which stems directly from the underdeveloped nature of their economies, the universities in the developing world are dependent on research carried out by the developed world to theorise and interpret physical and social phenomena. The variations in the contextual situations, however, reduce the applicability and relevance of these research findings to the developing world and thus it becomes mandatory for all universities to undertake research investigations.

In the context of the third function of the universities - service to society, research becomes the vital tool which will enable intellectuals to investigate into social ills that plague societies, and to offer solutions to these problems. Such solutions need to be based on quality evidence and data which can emerge only from research.

Further, most higher educational institutions have tended to overlook the role of evaluation all studies in teaching. The traditional approach has been to place the entire responsibility of learning on the student without considering the extent to which effective teaching is instrumental in fostering student motivation and learning. Current interest in the teaching-learning process has indicated that teaching-learning is a partnership in which both the teacher and the student enter into an agreement to realize the stipulated objective of success in learning. This approach brings into focus the need for continuous evaluation to ensure a high quality of education - evaluate student performance and factors which may influence such performance, evaluation of teaching, evaluation of the quality of the product-the graduate, his/her employability and his/her ability to meet employer and societal expectations.

The above parameters, applicable to any higher educational institution, are even more so relevant to open universities. The nature of the input and the process of teaching-learning are radically different from the conventional higher education system and thus pose a greater challenge in achieving quality assurance. The open entry policy, followed by open universities, in most of their programmes, if not in all, results in a widely heterogeneous population in respect of their formal educational qualifications. The fact that these students are mainly adults, perhaps employed and married, with work and family commitments makes the responsibility of the open universities even more serious.

The mode of teaching used in Open Universities, also makes evaluation mandatory, especially in view of the fact that students need to re-examine their previous study habits and acquire new study skills. In place of face-to-teaching, where teacher is the dominant actor in the teaching-learning process gathering necessary knowledge and transmitting it to the student, in distance education, the student is provided an access to knowledge, which he has to understand, reflect on and integrate into his already acquired knowledge to

become an independent learner. The success of the distance mode rests on several pre-requisites being satisfied.

- (i) that the course material supplied to the learner is user-friendly, stimulating and comprehensible and motivates him to move beyond the simple acquisition of knowledge,
- (ii) that the infrastructure needed for student support-library facilities, access to audio-video productions, and information technology is provided to enable him/her to work from home or the study centre, at his/her own pace and at his/her own convenience.
- (iii) that constant support is provided by the institution in the form of occasional contact sessions, practical experiences, tutoring and academic and personal counselling, to capture and retain students' interest and improve his/her ability to successfully complete the course, and
- (iv) that his/her academic work is continuously monitored and assessed so that formative evaluation can contribute to the final evaluation of his/her performance.

If the above conditions are not met, it is doubtful whether distance education can operate effectively. Only investigations and surveys of student satisfaction with these services will provide the feedback which will pave way for continuous improvement of the quality of education provided by an Open University. Research, thus would, in addition to helping an Open University to perform the function expected of every university would also enable it to understand the constraints which impinge on its effectiveness and stimulate it to search for solutions to overcome these constraints.

In this paper, the discussion will be restricted to the attempts taken by the Open University of Sri Lanka to promote research into distance education.

Promoting Distance Education Research: Challenge before OUSL

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was established in 1980. At present, with a total student enrolment of around 17000, OUSL caters to more than one-third of the total university student population in the country. The students are enrolled in 32 programmes of study and are attached to four Regional Centres and 19 Study Centres and Teaching Centres dispersed in all parts of the country. Almost 80 per cent of them are employed and 45 per cent are women. Sri Lanka has three national languages - Sinhala, Tamil and English and an avowed policy of providing higher education in all three languages whenever possible. Accordingly, at OUSL, 09 programmes are provided in all three languages, 01 programme in both Sinhalese and Tamil, 07 programmes in Sinhalese and English and 15 only in English. It is this heterogeneous nature of the student population, which makes research into distance education imperative at OUSL.

Being a national university, OUSL functions under the UGC as all the other conventional universities do. The recruitment and promotions of academic and academic support staff are governed by the same rules and regulations that are applicable to staff of other universities. This means that research and publications would be one of the major criteria for evaluating the work performance of staff. Information about research engaged in has to be submitted for granting annual increments and the Annual Report compiled in December presents the research contributions of individual staff members.

While these requirements should normally have encouraged academic staff of OUSL to engage in research, several factors limited their interest in distance education research.

- (i) Unlike in a conventional university, OUSL academic staff need to devote a considerable proportion of their time to course administration
- (ii) In the case of all academic departments except Education, there was a perception that research into distance education would not be given consideration in evaluation for appointments and promotions.
- (iii) There was no conscious or agreed policy at university level regarding the funding of distance education research.
- (iv) Knowledge and experience of conducting research into distance education of OUSL academic staff in some Faculties was minimal if not totally absent.

Thus by 1996, at the time that the collaborative venture with the Department of International Development (DFID), formerly known as the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) came into being, only a sparse number of research studies had been undertaken. Most of these were carried out by academics in the Department of Education for their post graduate degrees. A few studies conducted by the Dept. of Language

Studies had been done with the specific purpose of examining the programmes offered by them in relation to research findings and modifying the programmes accordingly.

The DFID - OUSL Collaborative Project

In 1996, the OUSL submitted a project proposal to the then ODA for support to enhance its capability in distance education. The project was to address qualitative issues in distance education and to seek improvements in course production, course administration and student support at OUSL. It also sought to improve research capability such as the capacity to collect, analyse and evaluate data on student background, performance and career paths. The project focused on consolidating existing activities and providing a crucial foundation for the future development of OUSL, enabling it to demonstrate its effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of tertiary education and increased targeting on labour market needs.

The five major target areas for assistance identified by OUSL were,

- research and evaluation capability
- student records
- course/programme design and production
- administration, and
- student support

The above areas were to be addressed through an aggregate mix of consultancy and training in Sri Lanka, study tours and training in U.K. and the region, and supply of equipment and materials.

Enhancing Research and Evaluation Capability of OUSL

Two specific areas of action identified in order to enhance research and evaluation capability were research advice (RUK3) and survey research (RUK2).

Research Advice

Under **research advice** a situation audit was carried out to identify policy and strategic issues, and the operational issues that influence research and evaluation capability at OUSL. It was also to make recommendations regarding implementation of research activity and the changes to the research environment.

The situation audit carried out in February, 1996 indicated several shortcomings that affected research capability at OUSL. It showed that there was no explicit policy on the purposes, role and functioning of research and evaluation activity in the field of distance education and that whatever research was being conducted was ad hoc and irregular. Further, no agreed structure for the organization of distance education research and evaluation activity existed.

The situation audit also pointed out that inputs should be made to train staff who were expected to carry out research activities, especially in the areas of research methodology and statistical analysis. In addition, the need to improve non-staff resources, such as good communication facilities, data processing facilities, library and information resources, facilities for provision of student data and funding for research emerged from this preliminary study. A change in the existing regulations was also deemed desirable so that recognition given to distance education research for promotions to senior academic positions could encourage staff to engage in distance education research.

The prevent research on distance education being restricted to ad hoc studies, a need for a formal plan of action in research and evaluation which would focus on the aspects of initiation of projects, implementation of studies, dissemination of research findings in the form of formal research reports, abstracts and summaries, publications and formal presentations and workshops and quality monitoring was identified. Above all, the situation audit pointed out the crucial importance of developing a research environment conducive to engagement in and implementation of distance education research. Especially, the need for further professional development of staff to enhance their literature search and review skills and language skills and provision of support to staff by senior staff both within and outside OUSL was stressed.

Survey Research

The second sub-project on Survey Research, sought to develop the research skills of staff and to initiate work on research studies that are relevant for improving the quality of education at OUSL. The consultant was to advise on the design of baseline surveys of employers, students and graduates and current materials design and production systems, instruments design, sample selection, sample methodology, data analyses, tabulation and report format. It was also envisaged that the consultant would advise on recruitment and training of baseline survey staff, prepare lists of publications and materials, and equipment required to support the implementation of the surveys.

Management Information System Research

The DFID project also sought to develop a Management Information System, (MIS) to overcome the shortcomings of the existing data base. It was believed that the development and utilization of the MIS could provide easy access to student data which are retrieved for programme evaluation and distance education research studies. The need for strengthening the IT Network was recognized at this point, and proposals for funding were submitted to donor agencies, independent of the DFID project for networking.

Progress in Distance Education

Under the DFID Project, several activities were undertaken in relation to distance education research. They comprised four consultancies each on Research Advice (RUK3), and Survey Research (RUK2) and four for Management Information Systems (MIS). A fifth consultancy for RUK3 is scheduled for December 1998.

The OUUK consultants worked in close collaboration with OUSL staff drawn from academic departments. The consultants submitted their recommendations which led to follow-up action being taken by OUSL.

Research Advice

In October, 1996, the Council of the Open University of Sri Lanka on the recommendation of the Senate, accepted the following official Policy Statement on Distance Education Research.

‘The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is committed to undertake continuing research on distance education to achieve its mission of increasing access to and success in adult learning at university level and to enhance the quality of equal opportunities for adult Sri Lankans. Distance Education research is an indispensable tool in the OUSL’s efforts towards excellence in teaching and scholarship while ensuring social equity.’

To facilitate Distance Education Research by staff, the Council approved the recommendation that staff undertaking distance education research be released for 50 per cent of time for a period of three months. Resources needed for such research were to be provided from the University Research Fund. The University also requested the University Grants Commission that distance education research/publications be given explicit recognition in schemes of recruitment upto a maximum of 50 per cent of the requirement and this request was approved by the Commission. The University also decided to strengthen the Core Research Unit in the Educational Technology division by the appointment of 2 lecturers and requested the UGC for more cadre posts.

It was also decided that until a full-fledged research and evaluation system is developed in the ET Division, monitoring of progress of research into Distance Education be done by the Committee on Research Advice on Distance Education (CRADE).

The Senate also approved the launching of the OUSL Journal to enable the findings of distance education research to be disseminated.

Survey Research

Conduct of workshops to develop research skills in academic and academic support staff was followed by the commencement of several research studies in the priority areas that were identified. These included surveys on OUSL graduates, OUSL support system, quality of study material, quality of contact sessions and student participation, employers and English language requirements in relation to selected courses.

In addition, evaluation of several programmes of study e.g. Post graduate Diploma in Management, Bachelor of Science Degree, studies of the student assessment system of the Faculty of Engineering Technology and background characteristics of non-starters in foundations level courses in Social Sciences were commenced.

At present, pre-pilot and pilot stages of these studies have been completed and the research teams have prepared draft reports. The main studies will be started shortly. The findings of these studies are discussed at regular monthly research seminars. The inaugural issue of the OUSL Journal was published in December 1997, and the work on the publication of the second issue 'Enhancing Distance Education at OUSL' has already been commenced.

Management Information System

The two consultants on the MIS have guided the relevant OUSL staff in developing the central data base which is crucial for the efficiency of the University operations as well as for research. This MIS is expected to function fully by March 1999. Simultaneously, the work on the Local Area Network (LAN) and providing access to the internet and electronic-mail has proceeded. At present, e-mail is accessible to the Library and the Faculties. Data on Student profiles are being collected at student registration and entered in the data base to enable it to be retrieved and processed by researchers. MIS consultants have also trained selected academics in the use of SPSS for research purposes, who in turn are expected to become trainers of their colleagues subsequently.

Unresolved constraints

The Open University with support from the DFID, UK, has as explained above, used a multi-pronged strategy to improve its research capability. Despite the initiatives taken, it is noted that the motivation for and engagement in distance education research by academic and academic support staff continues to be inadequate. This partly stems from the distribution of workload among academic departments and administrative divisions. While distance education entails much work related to administrative coordination, it is our experience that spurred on by the need to provide essential services to the students, a major portion of administrative work gets thrust on the academic departments. The University is at present, through several Senate Sub-Committees, attempting to specify the duties and responsibilities of different categories of OUSL staff.

Similarly, despite the policy decisions taken in relation to the release of academics for research, it is disappointing to note that very few faculty members have requested to be released from their normal work to undertake research. Moreover, external constraints imposed by the freezing of cadre positions by the UGC, both academic and non-academic, even when student numbers and number of programmes increase, has added to the workload of academic staff thus having an adverse impact on research. The recommendation to the UGC the staff be permitted to spend their sabbatical leave at OUSL itself to work on approved research projects in the Educational Technology Division was not approved. The establishment of a Dept. of Institutional Research to accept direct responsibility for distance education research, as proposed by the consultants has not materialized. Moreover, the Educational Technology division is faced with the difficulty of recruiting academic staff with relevant experience and has not been able to support the research initiatives of the University.

In the long term, however, despite these constraints, promise of greater involvement of staff in distance education research is indicated, as a direct consequence of the development of the MIS and the thrusts on staff development which emphatically stress the significance of distance education research for quality assurance at OUSL.

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