

RESEARCH STUDIES THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION: EXPERIENCES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA (OUSL)

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Introduction

The educational programmes of the Department of Management Studies of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) are designed to impart **knowledge** as well as to improve **skills** of the learners through the distance mode of learning. It necessarily implies that there is no frequent face to face contact between the teachers and learners. **Research** is one of the special methods adopted for developing skills of the learners. It provides opportunities for testing the integrated knowledge acquired by the learners through various subjects in practical situations. It is with that intention, 'research' has been introduced as a core subject area in the curricular of all the academic programmes of the Department of Management Studies in OUSL. The mission statement of the Department of Management Studies as stated below emphasizes the necessity to improve the skills of the learners.

The mission of the Department of Management Studies is to be a centre of excellence for continuous upgrading of the managerial skills through distance - open - continuing education in Sri Lanka. It is committed to maintain the highest standards of teaching, learning, training & research to enhance the capabilities of managers so as to help them to meet the challenges.

The Department of Management Studies of the OUSL presently conducts three programmes viz. Certificate Course in Entrepreneurship & Small Business Management (ESBM), Diploma in Management (DIM) and Postgraduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) and it is planning to launch the Bachelor of Management Studies (BMS) programme in 1999. Research component is a compulsory area for all these programmes. But it differs in nature according to the objectives of the programmes.

The objectives of the academic programmes and the nature of the research projects included therein are discussed below.

ESBM programme: The objective of this programme is to develop the skills of the small scale entrepreneurs and motivate them. The nature of the project to be undertaken by students is a **Feasibility Study** for starting a new business venture or expanding or diversifying an on going business.

DIM programme: The objective of this programme is to develop managerial skills required for middle and operational level managers and the research project is concerned with **analysing a managerial problems faced by a business organization.**

PGDM programme: The objective of this programme is to develop managerial and professional skills of the administrative staff in the public service as well as in the higher educational institutions. The nature of the research project pertaining to the programme is to identify a problem that exists in their work environments and to make an in-depth study of the problem using the concepts they have learned and suggest ways and means of improving the situation. The main idea is to develop the decision making and problem solving skills of the learners.

BMS programme: This programme is designed as an extension to the DIM programme. As such the objective is to enhance the managerial knowledge and skills of the learners in order to meet the existing staff requirements in the middle and higher level of business organizations. Therefore, the research project is intended to equip students with the skills to analyse a selected business situation, identify a problem or some phenomena and to develop a new strategy to improve that situation using the skills they have acquired in relation to the areas of their specialization.

PGDM
Programme

BMS
Programme

DIM
Programme

ESBM
Programme

2. The objectives and learning out comes of the research project

The main objective in including a research project in the syllabi of all the academic programmes of the department is to develop skills in students and help to apply the conceptual knowledge they have gained through different courses, in real life situations.

As such the learning outcomes to be acquired by the students by carrying out research should be to acquire;

Knowledge based outcomes

- Demonstrate a clear understanding of the theories and concepts related to various disciplines learned under the courses..
- Understand the practices of Management for decision making.

Skills based out comes

- Improve the skills required for identifying, analysing and solving problems prevailing in their work environments.
- Applying the knowledge to improve procedures for ensuring efficiency and effectiveness.
- Use the management techniques for physical and human resource development.

Learning outcomes expected to be achieved through research work are organized under the there main functions viz. enable ensure, and empower.

- Enable the learners to a act on their own without relying on others to do things for them.
- Ensure the development skills of learners by creating a sense of purpose and meaning in use of their skills and knowledge.
- Empower them to behave in a constructive manner using the skills.

3. Teaching learning process adopted for research work

The teaching learning process practiced for achieving the above outcomes, comprises of four major components.

Learning material

Workshop

Supervision and guidance

Workplan

Learning material

The theoretical part of the course is provided to the students through printed reading materials specially prepared for self study to suit the distance mode of education. It is prepared in the form of guidelines that covers the instructions relating to the areas of ;

1. Preparation of a research proposal
2. Collection of data

3. Analysis of data
4. Report writing

All these aspects are explained with examples in a user friendly manner so that the learners can easily grasp the crucial points.

Workshops

The workshops are arranged to discuss the problems and make the learners aware of the various aspects of the research. The first workshop, is meant to impart the knowledge required for preparing the research proposal. Here the emphasis is on how to involve the learners to identify a problem prevalent in a given situation. The discussions are conducted to acquire skills for conceptualizing the problem. The case study method of teaching and group activities are practised to, provide them with opportunities to interact among themselves and share their ideas.

At the next workshop the discussions are conducted to involve the learners activity in the process of collecting and analysing data and interpret them. The same problem identified for conceptualizing will be taken up for elucidating the methods of collecting data and identifying tools necessary for the analysis.

Finally the other requirements such as methods of presentation of data etc. are also discussed at the workshop.

Supervision over the research work

The services of supervisors are provided to counsel and guide the students individually and to help them conduct surveys, analyse data and to prepare the final report. The individual guidance over the research work starts only after the students obtained eligibility with acceptance of proposal submitted by the students. Though the supervisor - students contacts remains a minimum level under the distance learning system, opportunities are provided to the purposes of discussing the problems encountered by the students while doing their research work.

Workplan

This workplan depicts how the activities of the research study are organized to the learners to utilize the time available to ensure its maximum use. It also directs to learners to follow the activities sequential in their order. The duration of 10-12 months assigned for the research work is divided under the main stages of the process of the study indicating the required time period for each activity.

4. Student profile

Of the three programmes conducted by the Department at present the highest number of students registered is seen in the DIM programme. Accordingly this case study is developed on the basis of the data related to that programme. The data pertaining the student population of the DIM programme for the past three years are tabulated below.

Table 1 - Student population of the DIM programme

| Year | Student No. | | |
|---------|-------------|--------|-------|
| | New | Repeat | Total |
| 1994/95 | 314 | 459 | 773 |
| 1995/96 | 375 | 224 | 599 |
| 1996/97 | 354 | 115 | 469 |

source: OUSL Data

A research study carried out by the authors about the performance of the students at research project of the DIM programme reveals that 78% of the learners fall within the age group of 26 - 45 yrs. with a few young learners as indicated in table 2 below.

Table 2 - Age distribution of the students

| Age Group | % of Students |
|-----------|---------------|
| 18 – 25 | 16 |
| 26 – 35 | 46 |
| 36 – 45 | 32 |
| 46-55 | 04 |
| 56-65 | 02 |
| >65 | 00 |

The analysis also shows that about 70% of the students are General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L) qualified vide table 3.

Table 3 - Educational qualifications

| Educational Qualification | % of Students |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| E.S.B.M. | 06 |
| Foundation | 02 |
| G.C.E.(A/L) | 70 |
| Diploma | 10 |
| Degree | 02 |
| Post Dip. | 01 |
| Masters/P.H.D | 00 |
| P.H.D. | 00 |
| Others | 03 |

According to the gender based analysis it was found that 70% of the students are males.

An employment analysis of the students shows that 9 of them are professionals, 13 hold managerial posts, 11 are clerks and others fall into the different fields of education, technical, administration, production and marketing and few others are even self employed.

As such it is evident that being a matured and well-educated group of people they are capable of profiting by the distance mode of learning.

5. Students' performance at research project

The evaluation of students' performance at research project is done at two stages.

- i. First evaluation on basis of the research proposal
- ii. Final evaluation on the basis of the final research report

The research proposal is considered as the criteria to decide eligibility of the students to submit the final report.

The analysis of the performance of the students of the DIM programme reveals the following.

Table 4 - Eligibility status and submission of the report

| Year | % Received eligibility | % Submitted the report | % Passed * |
|------|------------------------|------------------------|------------|
| 1996 | 57.3 | 36.7 | 56.6 % |
| 1997 | 82.3 | 39.5 | 58.6 % |
| 1998 | 60.3 | result pending | |

* % passed from the number submitted the final research report.

Some of the students drop out at the stage of submission of the research proposal. The general tendency we observed is that 50%-60% of total registered students submit the research proposal. As the data given in the table 4 above indicates that this phenomena has changed to some extent

in 1997 when 82% have obtained eligibility. Introduction of the new methods of guiding learners towards the research project may have contributed to this improvement.

A high percentage of attendance at the first workshop is also visible which is focused on the guidance of learners about the methods of preparing the research proposal. On the other hand through the attendance at the second workshop which is meant for approving proposal is normally high students do not submit the proposal. Instead of obtaining approval at the second workshop they opt to mail proposal to the department. Very often due to the delays experienced in the Postal Department, these proposals are received late and there fail to obtain eligibility.

Of the students obtained eligibility only about 30% - 40% actually submit the reports. Finally only about 50% - 60% obtain pass marks to be successful in the research report. Therefore the main problem is that only less than half from the total eligible students are finally successful in the research report.

6. Findings of the survey done by the authors on delivery mechanism of the research

- About the course material

According to the survey, the academics and the students are of the opinion that the materials used for research have maintained in a satisfactory standard. The opinion of the students about the learning material is tabulated below according to their responses.

Table 5 - About course material

| | % Satisfied |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Objectives stated clearly | 98 |
| 2. Contents adequately covered | 82 |
| 3. Clearly presented | 90 |
| 4. Logically presented | 86 |
| 5. Adequacy of examples | 84 |

However 15% of the respondents preferred more illustrate we examples in the learning materials.

The students' attendance at workshop had been very satisfactory. Around 54% have attended all four workshops and around 80% have attended at least three of the workshops. According to the data given below 92% of the students reported that workshops are extremely useful.

About the workshops

Table 6 - About the usefulness of the workshops

| | % Agreed |
|--|----------|
| 1. Usefulness of group activities | 92 |
| 2. Guidance for research proposal | 86 |
| 3. Guidance for preparing the final report | 84 |

Supervision over research work

The research reveals that the opportunities given for individual guidance by the supervisors in addition to the workshops have been very useful to the students. According to the data 96% are of opinion that supervision had been useful for preparing the research proposal and there is 100% unanimity that it had been extremely useful for preparing the final report.

Table 7 - Useful of the supervision

| | % Agreed |
|--|----------|
| Individual guidance for project proposal | 96 |
| Final report | 100 |

Further the students opinion about the interest of the supervision for guidance remains a very satisfactory level which indicate a 88% response.

Work Plan

The data gathered has revealed that nearly 70% of the participants have faithfully observed the time frame given in the work plan. 66% have reported that the work plan was extremely useful and 32% of the balance are of the opinion that it has been useful. This is a clear reflection of the importance they attach to and their appreciation of the work plan.

Observations on present status

The survey has revealed that most of the learners are who being employed have to face some constraints due to their inabilities to obtain leave, and non-availability of sufficient leisure after duties. This has badly affected the work pertaining to these research study. It is such students that normally drop out after submitting their research proposal.

It appears that they devote very little time to read, even the materials supplied by the department. They also make no prior preparation for workshop. Consequently their active involvement in group activities is not at a satisfactory level which in turn restricted the possibility of sharing ideas with others.

The little access the student have to computer facilities and the lack of knowledge about the computer literacy also create problems for them for preparing the final reports. Therefore, they depend on the third party to get them word processed and for preparing illustrations.

The access to literature for this research is limited specially for students is rural areas and for those who follow the Sinhala & Tamil media.

Another factor hinders the satisfactory completion of research studies is the non-availability of data due or reluctance of the management of organizations to provide the researcher in the necessary data.

Finally considering the above facts and observations teaching and learning strategy adopted for research project have been modified in such a way to overcome most of the problems faced by the students. The success or failure of this strategy can be seen after evaluating the research reports submitted for the academic year 1998.