

Distance Education At Tertiary Level: An Effective Non Conventional Solution To Overcome The Severe Competition For University Education In Sri Lanka.

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INTRODUCTION

Distance Education and Open Learning coupled to the related attributes of Flexible and Multimedia Learning have developed by leaps and bounds over the last three decades. The Open University model of the UK with several modifications to suit local cultural, social & economic needs have been adopted in a number of countries .The age old concept of the grant of degrees in Universities has got extended to the award of Diplomas & Certificates at lower levels in both conventional and non conventional universities; this has been largely due to the momentum generated by Distance and Open Learning directed towards further and continuing education of adults and the employed. Concurrently the concept of giving mature students a second chance or even a delayed chance through Distance and Open Learning has continuously progressed. The establishment of the Commonwealth of Learning with its headquarters in Vancouver, Canada has over the past 15 years presented a much welcome catalytic effect for speedier developments in the enhancement of tertiary and higher education through Distance Education and Open Learning.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN SRI LANKA FOR 25 YEARS

Sri Lanka's burst into Open and Distance Learning commenced about 25 years ago with the establishment of the Sri Lanka Institute of Distance Education in the late seventies for the grant of diplomas. However the absence of an appropriate and effective infrastructure and management techniques resulted in very little programmes and far too many problems. However the establishment of the Open University of Sri Lanka in 1981 with the absorption of the Sri Lanka Institute of Distance Education, External Services Agency and the External Examinations Agency into it was a very significant and bold initiative adopted at a time when Sri Lanka was just adopting an Open Economy after many years of economic stagnation. Sri Lanka was also the first country in the South Asian Region to establish an Open University.

Up to the time that the Open University of Sri Lanka was set up in 1981, all education provided by the government was free but synonymous with considerable financial difficulties, poor salaries to all grades of staff and hampered by lethargy and bureaucratic delays. Conventional University education in eight state financed Universities was also severely hampered by lack of qualified academic staff, a problem that became very acute after the ethnic problems of 1983. University education became more & more severely competitive and the government resorted to unproductive and unethical standardisation mechanisms and District quotas in an attempt to facilitate the admission of students from rural and underprivileged areas. While the number of students admitted to conventional university free education was less than 2% of the relevant student cohort, students with better educational attainments (even from less privileged schools in so called educationally privileged districts) were not admitted and compelled to follow lower level education programmes or seek lower level employment. The complete absence of any degree level education outside the state system prevented many students outside the affluent and rich sectors of Sri Lankan society from aspiring to a University degree. Only those who had the necessary financial means and/or the relevant academic contacts were able to go abroad and obtain the degree level education that they were deprived of in Sri Lanka.

The Open University of Sri Lanka commenced operations by continuing with existing programmes that it inherited amongst which the most significant was the post graduate Diploma in Education which with large numbers and a readily available and committed group of students from amongst school teachers continues up to date.

In formulating new degree programmes of study, the Open University of Sri Lanka identified Law, Engineering and Science as potential candidates. In view of the surfeit of unemployed Arts Graduates which Sri Lanka had even at that time, a degree programme within the areas of Arts and Social Sciences was not considered necessary, feasible or worthwhile.

However the important difference between theory and practice as far as the concept of Distance Education and Open Learning was concerned in Sri Lanka was the fact that Sri Lanka had a huge number of school leavers who had not had the practical opportunity to read for a Sri Lankan University Degree in any field, even if they had the money unless they went abroad. The inability and reluctance of successive Sri Lankan Governments to establish, encourage or facilitate fee levying degree level universities/institutions in Sri Lanka has to be recorded as one of the most curtailing, disappointing and deplorable events of independent Sri Lanka.

A private Medical College established by a Sri Lankan body of professionals in the early eighties was taken over by the government as another free state institution in

the late eighties due to its inability to resist and withstand extensive political pressures after a destructive youth insurgency. This unfortunate incident put the Sri Lankan educational clock back by several decades: thus the establishment of much desired and much necessary degree level fee levying university institutions in Sri Lanka was put on hold. Even today it is still on hold!

FULLY COMPLETE SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING DEGREES AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

It therefore followed that the new degree programmes in Law, Science and Engineering at the Open University of Sri Lanka drew in thousands of applicants, a considerable number of whom were raw school leavers and young students many of whom were not employed, mature or adults. While an admission test had to be held for Law in view of the gross inability of the available human resources to accommodate more than about 250 students annually, **all** the applicants for Science and Engineering were admitted disregarding severe constraints coupled with the need for bigger laboratories for conduct of practical work. Sri Lanka also had the added difficulty that practical work in Sri Lankan schools had a severe set back since the abolition of any type of practical examination in the early seventies: Practically all young students were therefore handicapped by not having done practicals in school to any worthwhile extent or manner.

The Open University of Sri Lanka was also at that time perhaps the only Open University in the world offering **fully complete** Science and Engineering degrees leading to a relevant B.Sc. degree. The pressures that were mounted on the University system as a result were tremendous. Having joined the Open University of Sri Lanka in 1984 as the Professor of Chemistry, a few months after the first intake of students, I can recall and remember the considerable and apparently insurmountable problems that we were compelled to face: Lack of adequate academic staff, grossly inadequate laboratory space and a very slow building programme were some of the principal bottle-necks that we were compelled to overcome. Particularly in Sri Lanka, necessity turns out however to be the mother of invention and the only productive solution sometimes appears to be working under intense pressure. Needless to say we lost quite a number of students through our failure to provide the degree programme effectively and on time but on the other hand there was perhaps no other better way in which one could have overcome the numerous hurdles we had to face and thereby service the large number of students who continued to remain with us. The laboratory programme in all Science subjects was conducted in a very non-conventional but effective manner taking in to consideration the fact that we had many students thirsting for a degree and prepared to undergo considerable hardships in order to achieve same. On the other hand the student numbers were large and we had considerable pressure on our laboratories.

Student unrest in the whole country fuelled by a politically backed insurgency in the late eighties no doubt presented additional and unexpected problems as well. One of the important policy decisions that however had to be taken at the commencement of the B.Sc. degree programme was that it was optimistic to say the least to attempt to finish first B.Sc. Degree programme in three years-we in fact took 6 ½ years to finish the first programme even through with a depleted lot of students. Instructional day schools, home assignments and periodic assessments tests took a pride of place as teaching tools from the inception of the programme. This together with the inevitable need for eligibility through the attainment of a minimum mark for continuous assessment have been successful motivating mechanisms for students.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AS AN EFFECTIVE ULTIMATE SOLUTION FOR MASS-SCALE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

The successful completion of the B.Sc. programme at the Open University of Sri Lanka and its continuance over two decades producing over 2000 graduates educated through a very much more welcome and motivated mechanism of distance education has indeed been a success story in the Open University of Sri Lanka .Not only adults, the matured and the employed, which are the conventional targets group for non conventional distance education , but also a large number of school leavers, who would otherwise never have been enabled to obtain a recognised and acceptable university education, were able to reap the benefits of post-secondary education through the Open University of Sri Lanka.

The Law degree programme has on the other hand catered largely to more experienced and adult learners on account of the very restrictive and competitive admission test that enables only less than 10% who apply to be admitted into the programme. Since only one conventional university conducts such a programme in Sri Lanka, the Open University Law degree programme has benefited a large number of Sri Lankans to pursue an academic law degree and this includes large number of lawyers professionally qualified at the Sri Lankan Law College, which is another state institution which admits a very small fraction of the large numbers who sit a very competitive examination.

The Engineering programme while catering to a mixture of adults as well as school leavers has been less effective in terms of number of Graduates produced largely due to the restrictive nature of a long and compulsory relevant work experience programmes. Also the fact that the B.Sc. Engineering Degree can be pursued only by Engineering Diplomates has also resulted in a very small number of Engineering Graduates being produced.

Apart from these three degree programmes which were commenced at the inception of the Open University of Sri Lanka other degree programmes in areas such as Nursing, Management, and Social Sciences have been also offered to students over the years with considerable success. The Distance Education Mechanism and the Open Learning Philosophy have been very effectively adopted in all these programmes in enabling large numbers of Sri Lankan students, both adults and School Leavers, to pursue degree programmes in an effective and successful manner through the Open University of Sri Lanka. Apart from these Undergraduate degree programme several post graduate (taught) degree programme have also been successfully conducted with varying degrees of success in numerous fields including Engineering, Business Administration and Management.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka in perhaps unfortunately unique in the fact that despite several attempts and intentions of several governments of different political persuasions to permit the commencement of free levying universities and/or institutions of higher education in order to further expand and widen, the availability of University Education in Sri Lanka, intentions have not been translated into practice: The cause for this has been undue political pressures by extremist minorities whose unproductive criticism of such efforts has not been successfully overcome. Sri Lanka is thus one of the few countries in the entire Asian region which still did not have private degree awarding Universities or other higher educational institutions and as things stand at present, it is very unlikely that this situation will change in any significant manner in the near future.

Consequently, conventional university education is still confined in Sri Lanka to the 2% of the relevant student cohort admitted to non fee levying state universities. A microscopic minority which can afford the huge fees and other costs that need to be paid for education in foreign countries, do so at huge foreign exchange losses to the country. A limited number of Sri Lankans also obtain University level degree education in largely limited fields (not involving extensive laboratory work) such as Management, Computer Science and Business Administration through several private agencies set up within the country as business concerns and in collaboration with foreign universities. However the larger bulk of Sri Lankans who are not that financially placed and/or who do not have the necessary contacts and awareness are unfortunately restricted to the programmes offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka for the purpose of obtaining university education outside the non fee levying state sector.

The Open University of Sri Lanka through the mechanism of Distance Education and the concept of open Learning, has therefore become the only effective path available for an average Sri Lankan to pursue a recognised university degree at a moderate cost .It is indeed so gratifying and satisfying to observe the large number of persons employed at middle level (such as Technicians, Clerks, Typists, Word-Processing Assistants, etc.) making use of the opportunity provided by the Open University of Sri Lanka to obtain a University Degree and better their prospects and enhance their career re-development.

An ADB Loan just granted to the Open University of Sri Lanka has the prime objective of enhancing the student numbers from 20,000 to 40,000 over the next five years. While considerable numbers of these students will no doubt be at lower levels, it is also quite clear that the number of graduates produced by the Open University of Sri Lanka will also increase as a consequence. Better infrastructural development, completion of the building for Science and Technology faculties still to be undertaken (though on the original Open University Master plan) and other development oriented projects in the ADB loan project will it is hoped enable the Open University of Sri Lanka to play an even more important role in the years to come. Truly, Distance Education at tertiary Level will thereby turn out to be an even more effective non-conventional solution to overcome the severe competition for university education in Sri Lanka. This will enable the Open University of Sri Lanka to keep to its mission of dedicating itself to facilitating Open and Distance Learning; supporting excellence in research and scholarship and enhancing opportunities for adult life-long learning.