

Preparing Skilled and Committed Youth Workers for Development Work through Open Distance Learning

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Introduction

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is one of the partner institutions which collaborate in the delivery of the Diploma in Youth in Development Work under the initiative of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP). The Programme has been developed to prepare skilled and committed youth workers who will be in the forefront of development work in their respective countries. The development of the Programme itself was a team effort by academics drawn from a cross-cultural background, who used data, research material and case studies from representative Commonwealth countries.

While the Programme had specified objectives and recommended procedures for delivery, the diversity of cultures in which it was conducted understandably has led to variations in the implementation of the Programme. This paper discusses the challenges posed by implementing the Programme as it was stipulated by the Programme developers, the strategies used by the University to cope with these challenges and the level of effectiveness of these strategies.

From an Advanced Certificate to a Diploma

The Youth in Development Work Programme was first launched in the five Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka from 1998 to 1999. The first university to inaugurate the programme was Sri Lanka in September, 1998. Forty-nine of the fifty-four students nominated by the Ministry of Youth Affairs were enrolled in the first batch. Even though the programme was designated as a Diploma by the CYP, OUSL By-laws precluded it being offered as a Diploma as its duration was one year. Thus the programme commenced as an Advanced Certificate only in Sri Lanka among the Asian countries.

The first issue that arose thus was to provide uniformity in the award conferred across institutions offering the programme. It was necessary for the Programme to have the equivalent credit rating of four credits over a period of two academic years as for any other Diploma offered by OUSL.

The University appointed an Inter-Faculty Committee consisting of three professors to evaluate the academic worth of the Programme and make recommendations regarding its upgrading to a Diploma. The Committee suggested certain modifications to the course structure in order to pave way for the upgrading. The suggestions were;

1. The course codes to be revised to reflect their workload
2. The courses to be sequenced into two levels – Level 3 and Level 4
3. One of the courses, Youth and health, sustainable development and environmental issues to be separated as two courses
4. The Regional modules of Personality Development and Communication Skills and

Population and Family Life Education were also to be incorporated into the main course structure

5. A new course, which is not offered in other countries – Project to be added at Level 4.

On the basis of the recommendations made by the Committee, the OUSL Senate approved the upgrading in July 1999 and the Regulations for the award of the Diploma were approved in December 1999. Figure 1 shows the comparison between the old and the new course structures.

Figure 1
Comparison of Course Structure – Advanced Certificate and Diploma

Level	1998/99		Level	1999/2000	
Three	Course Code	Course Title	Three	Course Code	Course Title
	SSC 2101	Commonwealth Values in Development Work		SSD 1201	Commonwealth Values in Development Work
	ESC 2102	Young People and Society		ESD 1202	Young People and Society
	SSC 2103	Principles and Practices of Youth in Development Work		SSD 1203	Principles and Practices of Youth in Development Work
	ESC 2104	Working with People in Their Communities		ESD 1104	Working with People in Their Communities
	ESC 2105	Gender and development		MCD 1111	Promoting Enterprise and Economic Development
	ESC 2106	Learning Processes		MCD 1113	Personality Development and Communication Skills
	MCC 2107	Management Skills		SSD 1114	Sustainable Development and Environmental Issues
	MCC 2108	Project planning, Monitoring and Evaluation		ESD 1115	Population and family Life Education
	SSC 2109	Policy Planning and Implementation	Level Four	ESD 2105	Gender and Development
	MCC 2110	Conflict Resolution		ESD 2206	Learning Processes
	MCC 2111	Promoting Enterprise and Economic Development		MCD 2208	Project planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
	SSC 2112	Youth and Health, Sustainable Development and Environmental Issues		SSD 2209	Policy Planning and Implementation
				MCD 2210	Conflict Resolution
				SSD 2112	Youth and Health
				HSD 2216	Project

The upgrading of the programme to a Diploma necessitated a modification of the entry requirements. The entry requirements of any OUSL programme are at least three passes in GCE(A.L) Examination or the successful completion of any foundation course of OUSL. Accordingly, the Senate approved the amendment of the entry qualifications to the Diploma programme.

Responsibility for the Conduct of the Programme

The responsibility for conducting most of the programmes of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in OUSL are entrusted to single departments. Only the Department of Language Studies offers support courses in English to the other subject-specific programmes such as Law or Management. The Diploma in Youth Development Work was, however, unique in that the programme was a mix of courses selected from a variety of disciplines and veritably an inter-disciplinary programme. It was difficult envisage such a programme being offered by a single department. This led to three departments in the Faculty, Education, Management Studies and Social Studies agreeing to accept responsibility for individual courses. The overall coordination of this inter-departmental programme remained with the Dean who was assisted by a Chief Coordinator. Subsequently, the Department of Health Sciences volunteered to take charge of the course Youth and Health and the Programme thus became an inter-faculty programme.

Process of Learning

An innovative feature of the Diploma programme was the inclusion of a Learning Contract and a Learning Journal. In an education system characterized by rote memorization and examination domination, Learning Contract was a totally novel feature. Students had to be guided, unit by unit, by the tutor to complete the Learning Contract. The students were also required to identify the outcomes which he intends to achieve, plan the activities that need to be undertaken in order to reach that outcome and to complete a Learning Journal which will indicate what has actually been done. It envisaged a situation where the student takes responsibility for his /her own training, to plan activities not only to reproduce knowledge at examinations but also to apply that knowledge to practical situations, make learning relevant and develop competencies required in his work as a youth development worker.

The concept of Learning Contract and Learning Journal was novel not only to the student but also to the faculty. Thus an urgent need was to familiarize the staff, the majority of whom had Masters degrees with this concept and train them to provide guidance to students to write the Learning Contracts. The Course Management Team planned and conducted several workshops for staff training on the use of Learning Contracts and Learning Journals by invited resource persons. The resource persons, consisted of eminent professionals in the development field as well as a visiting professor from an overseas university.

Evaluation

The OUSL is the only distance mode university in the country. Its mission emphasizes the need to provide a second chance to persons who were denied access to a university education and to cater to the needs of adult employed learners. The evaluation scheme adopted for all OUSL programmes has a continuous assessment component which is assigned 30 per cent of the overall mark, while 70 per cent needs to be obtained from the final examination.

The Course Management Team reflected on the suitability of this scheme for the evaluation of students who were being trained to be youth development workers through a programme placing more weightage on development of skills, inculcation of attitudes than relying on knowledge. The Team also took into consideration the change that was expected to take place in the process of learning by using Learning Contracts and Learning Journals. Finally it was decided that the evaluation scheme should be modified to suit the objectives of the programme and allocate 30 per cent of the overall mark to the Learning Journal. This meant that the apportionment of marks would be 30 per cent for continuous assessment, 30 per cent for Learning Journal and 40 per cent for the final examination. The proposed scheme was approved by the OUSL Senate in 1999.

Medium of Instruction

A Commonwealth programme of study, understandably had to maintain uniform standards. This necessitated the moderation of the delivery of the programme and scrutiny of students' examination scripts by external moderators. Consequently there was a strong justification for English to be used as the medium of instruction even though for the work they were expected to perform, the most suitable would have been the local languages.

This position, however, posed a major problem for Sri Lanka as the medium of instruction even at the collegiate level in the students' case had been the mother tongue. The fact that all course materials are in English presented an additional challenge. Conscious of this major hurdle the Faculty requested the Department of Languages to conduct a two-week Intensive Course in English. After the Intensive Course, the students were also given guidance on further activities they should engage in to improve their English Language competency and advised to enroll in the General English programme of the OUSL when it was advertised. Subsequent batches of students were also similarly advised but to our knowledge none of the students have done so.

Achieving Expected Outcomes: The Shortfalls

The Diploma in Youth in Development Work Programme has now been in operation at OUSL for the past three years. The first batch of students who successfully completed the programme were awarded the Diploma in November, 2001 and the second batch has already sat for the last semester examination. It seems opportune to look back and examine the extent to which the efforts taken by the Faculty to overcome the recurring difficulties that ensued since the launch of the programme have been effective and what the achievements and failures are.

The effectiveness of an academic programme can be judged from several standpoints. An effective programme normally tends to attract more students and become popular. A programme is considered as effective if the success rates are reasonably high and non-completion and drop-out rates are low. A programme is seen as effective on the basis of evaluations done by external reviewers who examine the standards of delivery of the programme and the evaluation of students on identified criteria. Finally, the employers' evaluation of the products, the diplomates produced by the programme is critical in gaining acceptance for a programme.

The present paper does not have access to all the relevant information to gauge the effectiveness of the Programme under study. It will, however, examine the demand for the programme, the participation, completion, non-completion and drop-out rates of the students who enrolled in it and the stakeholders' observations regarding the programme. The paper will also explore the reasons for the level of effectiveness as evident from the above data.

Demand for the Programme

In Sri Lanka, only less than 20 per cent of the students who gain eligibility to enter universities are admitted to the 11 conventional universities. Students with relatively high performance at GCE(A.L) Examination in spite of their high motivation for a higher education are denied enrolment due to the restriction of university places. As a result, the demand for OUSL programmes of study and other similar tertiary level qualifications is very high. Programmes such as Diploma in English, Bachelor of Laws, and Diploma in Management which recruit students at the same level as the Diploma in Youth in Development Work programme hold admissions tests to select students and restrict the intake to around 10 per cent of the number of applicants.

This particular Programme, however, presents a sharp contrast. Table 1 indicates the demand for the programme over the four-year period under survey.

Table 1
Demand for the Diploma in YDW Programme

Year	No. Applied	No. Registered
1998/99	54	49
1999/2000	88	44
2001/02	44	21
2002/03	83	36

In the first year of the Programme, all the students who applied were nominated by the Ministry of Youth Affairs. Thus even though OUSL had agreed to enroll 75 students for the first batch, out of the 150 places allocated, the total number did not exceed 54 and only 49 of these enrolled. In the subsequent years, applications were entertained through open advertisement but without a noticeable increase in demand. The highest number of applications were received in 2001/2002 after a concerted publicity drive, with programme brochures being sent to all relevant organizations which were followed up by visits to some of these organizations by the

coordinators. Yet the interest shown in applying for the programme had not sustained and only less than 50 per cent of the applicants registered for the programme.

The reasons for this situation appear to be

- Uncertainty regarding the employment situation which awaits the Diploma holders after they complete the programme which prevents secondary school graduates from applying for the programme.
- The fact that this programme is being offered in English which demands greater commitment from the students unlike for programmes available in local languages.

Participation

OUSL uses print materials, day schools and tutorials in its delivery. Day Schools and tutorials are face-to-face contact sessions at which students clarify points of difficulty in discussions with their teachers. Especially to draw up their Learning Contracts, continuous interaction with faculty was essential. In this programme these face-to-face sessions assumed even greater significance as the medium of instruction was English and the language used in presenting information is quite sophisticated. OUSL policy makes, however, attendance at Day Schools optional and therefore students are not compelled to fulfill an attendance criterion to sit for the examination.

Secondly, the fact that the total number of students was small and the dearth of academics from diverse fields needed for an inter-disciplinary programme like this compelled the University to conduct this programme only in Colombo, the Central Campus. The students were dispersed among a number of subjects and almost half the number was based in Western Province (the three districts of Colombo, Kalutara and Gampaha), of which Colombo was the capital. The students, however, were drawn from all parts of the country where they were employed which made it extremely difficult for them to attend Day Schools regularly (See Table 2).

Table 2
District Origin of YDW Students

District	1998/99	1999/2000
Colombo	06	15
Kalutara	09	04
Gampaha	04	06
Kandy	05	02
Nuwara Eliya	01	00
Galle	04	02
Matara	01	01
Hambantota	02	00
Kegalle	06	01
Kurunegala	06	01
Puttalam	00	04
Badulla	02	01
Monaragala	01	00
Anuradhapura	00	02
Ampara	02	00
Batticaloa	00	01
Trincomalee	00	04
Total	49	44

Other reasons such as the students having to be in their in work-places during the week-ends due to the nature of their involvement with community work or the prevailing situation in the country which made travel from certain parts of the country extremely difficult and thus compounded the above problem. As a result, the participation in the Day Schools was visibly low as compared with other programmes of study which were more decentralized.

The support extended to the students by the staff is demonstrated by the fact that in spite of small student numbers, this programme is perhaps the only one that does not adhere to strict activity schedules, often giving extensions to allow students to submit their Learning Journals.

Completion, Non-completion and Drop-out

Among other factors, student characteristics can influence the success, retention or drop-out rates of a particular programme. Table 3 gives a comparison of the characteristics of the students in the first two batches.

Table 3
Student Characteristics- YDW Programme

Sex	1998/99	1999/00
Male	43	37
Female	06	09
Age		
22-27	02	08
28-37	36	23
38-47	08	10
Above 48	03	02
Ed. Qualifications		
GCE(A.L)	39	28
Degree	10	16
Postgraduate	--	02
Total	49	46

The above table indicates that 100 per cent of the students are adults. Their ages also imply that that they would have other family responsibilities which would make heavy demands on their time, which could have cut into the time devoted for studies.

The Open University allows the students to follow programmes at their own pace and thus they could have enrolled for a limited number of courses that they were confident of completing. But even though they were counseled in this manner, normally students attempt to offer the maximum number of courses they are permitted to enroll in.

As pointed out earlier, however, the most serious challenge was posed by the level of competency of English, of the students. It was found that 51 per cent of the candidates who sat for the Grading Test in English were placed at the Beginners' Level. The marks of these students ranged from 01 to 15. The highest mark obtained was 42 (only one student). Preparing for the examinations, which unlike in some of the other courses had to be answered only in English and writing the Learning Journals obviously had made the task even more daunting. As a result, the completion rates of this programme were quite low (Table 4).

Table 4
Completion Rates of YDW Programme

Year	Enrolled	Completed	% Completed
1998/99	49	08	17
1999/2000	46	08	17
2000/2001	21	03*	14

- Probable to pass

It is noteworthy that in the first batch only 09 of those who did not complete had re-registered for the programme. In the case of the second batch, 10 of the non-completers had re-registered.

What do the students who complete the programme feel about it? The unanimous view was that the programme had equipped them with up-to-date knowledge, positive attitudes to their work and allowed them to develop relevant skills. They felt most of the courses were relevant for their lives and work. One course which stood out singly, without gaining much appreciation was the first to be taught, Commonwealth Values in Development Work. This probably indicated the very narrow perspective the students had of the world around them.

At the end of the first cycle of the programme, a survey of students' employers was attempted through a mail questionnaire. A mail questionnaire was chosen for practical convenience, even though it was clear that an interview would have been more appropriate. Only about 20 per cent of the employers responded but they all indicated positive perceptions; they declared that their employees were working with better commitment and were more knowledgeable about their work. It is not certain whether they had given an objective evaluation of their own employees

Survey of student feedback on the programme clearly indicated the following as the reasons for non-completion.

1. High work-load involved in the programme, due to the need to participate in tutorial sessions as a result of Learning Contracts and the time required to produce Learning Journals.
2. Heavy work-loads often involving weekend work sometimes coinciding with Day Schools and tutorial classes resulting in the inability to attend contact sessions.
3. Problems of coping with English.

Challenges for the Future

The cursory examination of the data that was collected in respect of the Diploma in Youth in Development Work enables us to identify the issues that need to be addressed in the future. Some of these have to be attended to at the level of sponsorship, the Commonwealth Youth Programme level. The Review Meeting held in 2001 focused on action that has to be taken to restructure the first course in the Programme, Commonwealth Values in Development Work.

Partner institutions have also pointed out that the nature of this Programme does not make it mandatory for it to be offered in English as the majority of the diplomates would be using their mother tongue in their day-to-day work as development workers. It is hoped that once the first two offerings of the programme are completed the partner institutions will be permitted to conduct it in local languages, especially in those countries that do not use English as a medium of instruction at secondary school level. While there is no likelihood of these students proceeding to a Bachelors degree programme in the University of Huddersfield as earlier discussed, using the local language as the medium does not need hinder that prospect as English proficiency can be made mandatory for those selected to follow the Huddersfield degree.

Secondly, it is clear that in spite of all the efforts taken so far the University has failed to provide a sufficiently satisfactory support service to the students following this Programme. The discussions that were started with conventional universities in the regions away from Colombo, such as University of Ruhuna and the Eastern University to conduct Day Schools with the help of their academics need to be continued with greater keenness to examine the possibility of decentralization of academic activities. Increasing the recruitment of students for the Programme, however, is essential before taking this step, as the University needs to consider the economics of decentralization. In addition, the Course Management Team is exploring the possibility of obtaining the help of the Department of Language Studies so that support to improve the English competency of the students can be continued.

The Open University continues to appreciate the value of this inter-disciplinary programme which aims at producing skilled and committed workers for Development Work. The University believes that with time and support of the Commonwealth Youth Programme it will be able to resolve the major issues faced by the students and offer them an effective means of career satisfaction and mobility.