OPEN UNIVERSITY'S CONTRIBUTION TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLING IN SRI LANKA

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Case Study

Introduction

Research literature on schooling effectiveness and school improvement has shown that certain strategies are particularly important in building and maintaining a quality system (Cuttance, 1997; Reynolds, 1992). One significant strategy that has been brought out is the identification and provision of the professional skills and knowledge required by staff to implement the school's development programme. As such a commitment to professional development and training is vital if the school is to ensure that all staff are capable of and do achieve the outcomes that are stated in a school plan. Such professional development needs to be integrated into the school's everyday operations in a way that allows individual staff to learn from colleagues and provide access to external sources of knowledge.

The first step towards professional development of teachers in a school system is their initial training. Unlike in most educational systems, in Sri Lanka, the policy of appointing professionally trained teachers to schools was not mandatory. Graduate teachers were appointed to secondary schools without any exposure to pedagogical knowledge or an opportunity to develop teaching skills. Often it became politically expedient for governments to give teaching appointments to unemployed youths (including university graduates) without training. Due to the inadequacies for teacher training facilities in the University departments of education, they continued to teach without training for considerable periods of time. The National Education Commission has now and avowed policy of not appointing untrained graduate teachers to the school system.

Of the four universities in Sri Lanka with departments/faculties of education, the Open University is the only university which uses the distance mode for teacher training. OUSL's Department of Education was one of the departments that were established with the establishment of the University in 1980.

Commencement of distance teacher education programmes was perceived as a strategy of overcoming several obstacles that lay in the path of providing training for all teachers in the profession. On the one hand, the conventional universities were clearly unable to fulfil the demands of an increasing graduate teacher population for training. Secondly, the Ministry of Education was also not in a position to release large numbers of graduates teachers for full-time training with pay. Teacher education through distance thus emerged as the most feasible strategy and OUSL has been able to cater the training needs of teachers dispersed in all nine provinces with a minimum amount of displacement from their schools and homes. Further, teacher education through distance also enables the teachers to put theory they master through the programme, into practice continuously and to integrate professional development into the school's everyday operations.

At present, OUSL conducts teacher education programmes for pre-school, primary and secondary school teachers. These are,

(1) Certificate Programme in Pre-school Education (CPE) which provides training for pre-school teachers and those intending to become pre-school teachers,

(2) Advanced Certificate Programme in Pre-school Education, (ACPE) for enhancing knowledge and skills of those who have completed the Pre-school Certificate Programme in order to provide an opportunity for further education and skill improvement,
(3) Bachelor of Education (Natural Science) [B.Ed. (N.S.)] Programme for preparing initial training for science teachers in secondary schools and for providing further higher education to non-graduate teachers of science,
(4) Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme (PGDE) for graduate teachers at primary and secondary school level, and
(5) Master of Education Degree Programme (M.Ed.) for graduate teachers, teacher educators and educational managers for providing advanced knowledge and skills in education.

Currently, the Department of Education is also developing a Master of Arts Degree Programme in Teacher Education to cater to the specific needs of teacher educators in the system.

As the Master of Education draws its clientele from educational managers and staff of other teacher education institutes, a research dissertation has been included in the curriculum to enable the study of critical issues faced in education to be undertaken.

The island-wide network of regional and study centres of the Open University enable the teachers in the school system to make effective use of distance education to upgrade their knowledge and skills and to contribute to the quality improvement of primary and secondary schooling in the country.

The paper will confine itself to an examination of the effectiveness of the Post-graduate Diploma in Education and the Bachelor of Education programmes as indicated by the research studies that have been undertaken in the recent past.

Undergraduate and Graduate Teacher Education Programmes of OUSL: An Overview

The Bachelor of Education (Natural Science) Programme is offered to jointly by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Natural Science. It is a four academic year programme, the first two years (Levels 3 & 4) of which are devoted to the teaching of science subjects and the last two years (Levels 5 & 6) to education. It is an eight credit programme in which candidates are required to acquire two credits at each of the Levels. The Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme is of two academic years duration and a four credit programme.

The structure of the curriculum in the professional area of the two programmes is given below (Table 1).

Table 1
B.Ed. and PGDE Programme

B.Ed.			PGDE	
Level		Course Titles	Level	Course title
5	Compulsory Courses	Psychology of the Child	6	Principles of Education
		Philosophical, Sociological and Historical Foundations of Education		Educational Psychology
		Classroom Learning and Methods of Teaching		Evaluation of Learning Outcomes
				Student Adjustment and Counselling

	Optional Courses	Curriculum Management and School Organization Guidance and Counselling Primary Education	7	Teaching Practice Methods of Teaching Curriculum, School and Problems of Education Educational Administration and Management
6	Compulsory Courses	Psychology of the Adolescent Teaching Practice Project Measurement and Evaluation		

OUSL being a distance education university uses multi-media in all its teacher education programmes. Print material continues to be the major mode of teaching but increasingly audio-visual materials are being used. As teacher preparation demands an emphasis on practical skill development, ten weeks' teaching practice in schools is a compulsory component of the programme. Library facilities provided at the Main Library in the Central Campus and the Regional/Study Centres supplement teaching material.

Orientation of students enrolled in these programmes to enable them to complete the programmes successfully is done through orientation sessions by staff in the Department as well as through the provision of a Students' Guidebook. This is considered as a significant measure as the large majority are employed, mature age students:

Among the student support mechanisms used are day schools, practical classes (in the case of the B.Ed. Programme), tutorial classes, demonstration and evaluation of actual teaching and teaching practice. Formative evaluation through continuous assessment and feedback from tutors is a yet another mechanism. Master teachers deployed in all schools in which student teachers undertake teaching practice observe five prepared lessons and provide guidance to improve teaching skills. Evaluation of student performance uses, in addition to continuous assessment, performance at a written examination and evaluation of teaching practice.

Evaluation of the Teacher Education Programmes

A small number of studies have focussed on different components of these teacher education programmes or on the perceptions of different categories of students enrolled in these programmes. Among them, there is one study which has examined the Bachelor of Education Programme. This section of the paper will examine the findings arrived at by these studies and attempt to gauge the effectiveness of the programmes through these findings.

Evaluation of Print Material

Gunawardena and de Zoysa (1995) examined the perceptions of student teachers of the PGDE programme who reside in remote areas of the county. Student perceptions were obtained through a mail questionnaire sent to 185 students identified as living in areas distant to the OUSL regional/study centres, of whom 57 per cent had responded.

Fifty-one per cent of the respondent student teachers expressed satisfaction with print materials. They affirmed that knowledge was systematically and lucidly presented and that the style of writing was learner-friendly. A minority (13 per cent) were dissatisfied with the print materials. The shortcomings discerned by them were,

(i) complex topics and abstract concepts not being presented to facilitate understanding
(ii) Stilted language which indicates direct translation from English
(iii) Imbalances in length i.e. some topics dealing with too much detail while others are not discussed adequately.
(iv) Printing errors
(v) Information not being updated

The majority (61 per cent) found the print material appropriate for self-study:-

Kudaligama and Goonetilake (1995) analysed the perceptions of 73 students following the B.Ed. (Natural Science) Programme to find out the extent to which the objectives of the B.Ed. programme had been achieved and to identify the problems and issues faced by them in schools in achieving the objective of self-development. Ninety-four per cent of these students stated that the study of course materials had helped to improve their knowledge and understanding of science.

Contact Sessions

OUSL uses day schools and tutorial classes to provide students an opportunity of obtaining support from academic staff. Studies point out, however, that the students may not be able to get the full benefit of the provision of Contact Sessions due to various reasons. Wijeratne (1995) thus remarks that the students in her sample, who lived in localities distant from the Central Campus tend to miss the scheduled contact sessions and are also compelled to leave the centre in order to reach home before it was too dark. Due to physical exhaustion resulting from long hours of travelling, they tended to be lethargic and were unable to participate fully in the discussions. Their evaluation regarding OUSL academic staff and visiting staff also seemed to be dissimilar. They found the contact sessions conducted by the former to be more productive.

De Zoysa (1995) analysed the responses of a sample of 137 students in the PGDE programme regarding the effectiveness of contact sessions. Her study also revealed that the attendance at the contact sessions was not satisfactory. She found that the fact that Day Schools and Tutorials were not compulsory prevents full attendance at these sessions.

Fifty-five per cent of student teachers in Gunwardena and de Zoysa's study (1995) felt the number of Day Schools was not sufficient. Poor attendance was also noted in this study also as only 33 per cent stated that they had attended more than half the number of Day Schools held. Fifty-six per cent expressed satisfaction with the guidance received at Day Schools while twenty-three per cent were dissatisfied. The reasons given by the later were insufficient time for discussions, not focusing on the course materials and non-conformity to assignments.

Tutorial classes unlike Day Schools are geographically more decentralized as they are held in provincial towns. The percentage indicating institutional/counsellor shortcomings was greater in the case of tutorial classes rather than on Day Schools. Yet a higher percentage of student teachers (89 per cent) considered tutorials as more productive than Day Schools. In the case of B.Ed. (Natural Science) programme, evaluation of contact sessions by students was as follows: (Kudaligama and Goonetilake, 1995) (Table 2).

Table 2
Perceptions of students teachers regarding the contribution of different types of contact sessions

Type	Greatly Improved	Improved	Not Improved
Practical Classes	42	49	09
Day Schools	03	84	13
Tutorial Classes	19	42	39

Thus unlike in the case of the PGDE programme, B.Ed. students appear to evaluate practical classes, and day schools more positively than tutorial classes.

Assignments

Jayatillake (1996) analysed the responses of 283 student teachers in her study on the Evaluation of Assignments as used in the PGDE programme. The following findings were arrived at by her study.

1. Clear and specific objectives are not available
2. Non availability of an advisor in completing assignments.
3. Preparation of assignments was satisfactory but not the distribution of assignments for marking and monitoring and checking the quality of marking.

4. Turn around period is too long.
5. Very often comments by the examiners are too short. Some times the comments are irrelevant or not found at all.
6. There is no consistency in grades by different examiners.
7. The services rendered by regional centres with regard to activities connected with the assignments are not satisfactory.

Gunawardena and de Zoysa (1995) pointed out that of the student teachers in their study 85 per cent had not reported any problems in submitting assignments on time. Yet a considerable number identified difficulties faced by student teachers. These were,

1. Inadequacy of time to write assignments (personal and official)
2. Difficulties related to the institutional shortcomings, e.g. difficulties of organization, non-receipt of course materials on time, print material lacks necessary information, difficulties in comprehending subject matter, lack of support to write assignments. Day Schools not being conducted prior to assignment submission, and
3. Large number of assignments to be submitted and the number of questions to be answered for each assignment.

Concern was also expressed by these teachers regarding the length of the turn-around time. Fifty per cent stated that two to four months elapse for the return of assignments. This same shortcoming was highlighted by Oliver (1997) whose comparative study focussed on the responses of 62 student teachers following the PGDE programme in the University of Colombo and OUSL. These respondents also were dissatisfied about the nature of feedback received from assignments. Either the comments were too short or there were no comments at all. Similarly, only 49 per cent in Gunawardena and de Zoysa's study (1995) reported feedback was satisfactory.

Teaching Practice

Teaching practice can be considered without much dispute as the most significant component in the Teacher Education Programmes as it attempts to link theory with practice and to develop the essential teaching skills needed by a teacher. Wijeratne (1989) and Fernando (1992) argue that the present system of devoting 10 weeks to teaching practice which amount to half a credit only out of a total of four credits is insufficient in developing the teaching competencies of student teachers. Fernando (1992) in fact, recommends the inclusion of school practice which will allow the teacher to participate in all the activities of the school effectively without limiting himself/herself to classroom teaching.

Student teachers (85 per cent) responding to Gunawardena and de Zoysa (1995) endorsed the present practice of conducting Stage I of teaching practice in the student teachers' own schools as it is more effective in a familiar environment. They felt it was (1) easier to procure the necessary resources, (2) convenient, (3) possible to save time, (4) less stressful, (5) less disruptive to school work and (6) possible to ensure continuity of training and lessen obstacles found in strange schools. The majority (51 per cent) also endorsed the practice of stage II being conducted in schools other than their own. A predominant majority (84 per cent) also rated Master Teachers' assistance as very satisfactory. They appreciated the fact that the Master Teachers had acted as a counsellor, a guide, an evaluator, a critic and a supporter (77 per cent). Only two per cent had commented on their negative attitudes and rigid, formal relations.

When asked o indicate the extent to which teaching practice enables them to acquire the skills needed to teach two per cent find this to be extremely effective, another 34 per cent very effective and yet another 48 per cent moderately effective.

Wijeratne (1995) however, reported that students in her sample, in distant areas had responded that they do not receive enough guidance in lesson planning, and evaluation of their teaching from Master Teachers. They also reported that inadequacy of time for discussions with Master Teachers as unsatisfactory.

The Master Teachers also, in turn, pointed out the difficulties encountered by them, especially in remote schools, due to transport difficulties, where sometimes even motorable roads are not available and insufficient remuneration is paid for travelling.

Oliver (1997) inquired into the three domains under teaching practice namely, preparation of a lesson, presentation and teacher attributes/characteristics. Comparison of the levels of teaching at entry and exit level indicated that at exit level the performance had reached 62.3 per cent in the case of OUSL students and 58.7 per cent in the case of conventional student teachers.

Kudaligama and Goonetilake (1995) inquired into the extent to which the B.Ed. programme has helped the students to improve the competencies required of science teachers. The student teachers indicated that an improvement had occurred in the ability to experiment with new teaching methods, to identify students' personal problems and to use new scientific techniques in teaching (72 per cent), to identify problems related to the teaching-learning process (71 per cent), to understand students through observation (70 per cent), to manage time (68 per cent), to use Scientific equipment in class (67 per cent), to prepare teaching-learning equipment (65 per cent), to plan lessons (64 per cent) and to manage teaching-learning resources (55 per cent).

Teacher Attitudes

The development of positive attitudes towards factors related to teaching and learning is an objective of any teacher education programme. Kudaligama and Goonetilake (1995) discerned a positive improvement of attitudes of student teachers following the B.Ed. Programme (Table 3)

Table 3
Student teacher responses regarding creation of positive attitudes

Attitude Towards	Improved	Not improved
Preparation for Teaching	98	2
School	85	15
Teaching	84	16
Student Learning	78	22
Student Behaviour	75	25
Use of Teaching -Learning Aids	73	27
Evaluation of Learning Outcomes	59	41

Their attitudes towards students with special needs and classroom discipline had not improved.

OUSL's Response to Challenges of Improving Teacher Education Programmes

The findings of the above studies appear to indicate an overall satisfaction with all the teacher education programmes offered by OUSL. The studies are however, useful in identifying the shortcomings of the programme wherever they occur and therefore, for communicating to the institution regarding strategies that need to be considered for minimizing these shortcomings. The research studies referred to above as well as informal discussions of staff with students have prompted the Department to introduce mechanisms for improving the effectiveness of these programmes.

Some of the current initiatives in operation are not specific to the teacher education programmes but embrace all OUSL programmes. One such initiative is the decision take by the University to hold staff development as an up-front objective. Bi-annual staff development workshops designed to train university teachers in their roles as distance educators are being conducted at present. These are supplemented by regular workshops on Instructional Design and Audio-Video Production.

To improve the quality of print materials a House Style and a Manual on Writing for Distance Education (Bridging the Gap) have been prepared. Consultants from OUUK, under a project sponsored by the Department of International Development (UK) has trained a core group including staff of the Education Department on material production and desktop publishing. This training has been supplemented by attachments of staff to OUUK for short periods of intensive training. All Departments have now formulated

their action plans for course revision and updating, and transformation into distance education. Enhanced infrastructure facilities are also expected to improve the quality of printed course materials.

At the Departmental level, efforts have been made to select more competent visiting academics and Master Teachers and to train them for the roles expected, such as day school teacher, tutor, assignment examiner and Master Teacher. Enhanced rates of payment to instil conscientious performance of tasks have already been introduced for day school teaching and assignment marking and similar recommendations have been made for remunerating Master Teachers.

To reduce 'turn-around' time of assignments, a larger number of assignment examiners have been appointed and academic coordinators have been appointed to Regional Centres to facilitate the coordination of marking of assignments. Similarly, monitoring of the quality of assignment marking is being done by random checking of the assignments marked by visiting academics.

Increasing analysis currently being placed on evaluation of programmes through research into distance education would also undoubtedly provide insights regarding areas of concern and action to improve effectiveness of these programmes.

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