

Online Learning for Extending Access and Facilitating Employability in Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

The Sri Lankan University system which operates under the Universities Act of 1978 consists of the following institutional framework:

- 15 National Universities,
- One School (the School of Computing, the University of Colombo) a number of Institutes, several Postgraduate Institutes and Centres (e.g. Staff Development Centre, University of Colombo) attached to the universities.
- The University Grants Commission (UGC), the apex body that allocates funds to the universities, determines admission criteria, and supervises and monitors the overall working of the university system.

The National Education Commission, established under the provisions of the National Education Commission Act No.19 of 1991 has the primary responsibility of making recommendations to the President of Sri Lanka on educational policy, including higher education.

Until recently university education continued to be a government monopoly in Sri Lanka. All state universities are government funded, and except the Open University of Sri Lanka, depend on government grants for about 95 % of their expenditure. While most post-graduate courses are fee-levying, all undergraduate courses are provided free of charge. Students are also heavily subsidized through scholarships and bursaries, and hostel facilities are provided at a nominal charge.

Sri Lanka's Human Development Index (HDI) was 0.743 and the Gender Development Index (GDI) was 0.735 in 2007/08 (UNDP, 2007/08). The corresponding HDI and GDI ranks are 99 and 88. While progressive policies implemented in education helped to expand facilities in general education and to benefit both sexes, the percentage of the age group (20-24 years) entering university education increased negligibly. Thus in 2006, 58.21% of the students who sat for GCE (A.L) Examination were eligible for admission but only 13.97% of them could gain admission (UGC, 2006).

In the last two decades, the number of professional associations and institutions affiliated with foreign universities has increased steadily as a result of the liberal market policy espoused by

successive governments. The number of A.L qualified students seeking admission to overseas universities has also increased. Nevertheless the percentage of students of the relevant age group in university education (including the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL)) is abysmally low –3% in state universities, while the increasing number of private institutions take in around 6% and Advanced Technical institutions admit 2% (World Bank, 2005). Intense competition to enter the state universities in the context of the limited number of places available has created frustration among the increasing secondary school population and has spawned a tuition industry. In addition, state universities have been beset with problems such as resource constraints that have affected the quality of inputs including staff development, the failure to promote proficiency in English and the slow pace of structural and curriculum reforms.

Technical-Vocational education received low priority in policy planning and saw uncoordinated and ad hoc developments despite the establishment of the Tertiary and Education Commission in 1991. The Skills Development project introduced at the end of the twentieth century and the new Technical Education Project focusing on developing higher level skills in tertiary education institutions have injected a new dynamism into this sector.

Studies on external efficiency of education (Gunwardena et al, 1990, 1991; Vidanapathirana,) have shown that unemployment rates of young people are especially high among educated groups, such as GCE O/L and A/L qualified individuals and university graduates with unemployment ranging from 26% - 34% for both sexes combined. World Bank argues, as is widely accepted, that the principal reason for the phenomenon of unemployed educated young people is the structural unemployment caused by the slow pace of economic growth.

At the same time, studies have shown that a demand for graduates exists in certain fields like Information Technology and Business Management and for graduates who possess skills and attributes which include English language competency and computer skills expected by the employers. The urban-rural divide in access to Information and Communication Technology and the wide gulf between Colombo and the rest of the country is an issue of concern.

INITIATIVES UNDER THE DISTANCE EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME

Distance Education Partnership Programme (DEPP) is one of the three major components of Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) funded by the Asian Development Bank and the Government of Sri Lanka. The overall goal of the DEMP is to increase socio-economic growth by developing a modern, high quality human resource base through distance education.

DEPP, the major component of DEMP has been established to raise quality and enhance capacity with the aim of setting up and managing a distance education network that provides assistance to develop curriculum content, training, mentoring, peer group support and interaction and maintenance of hardware and software. The project provides expertise, capacity building, technology transfer, equipment and software and recurrent costs.

DEPP has two parts: Part A includes the establishment of the DEPP office to provide curriculum development, training, research, marketing and contract outsourcing management services for online distance education for public and private post-secondary institutions. DEPP activities included the development of the business and marketing plan, set up a Course Development Unit, and train local web writers and online tutors to operate distance education programmes online. Support for local staff, training, operating costs was provided under the project to cover costs for the first five years.

Part B includes the establishment of the National Distance Education Network (NDEN). The NDEN is the hardware side of the DEPP and includes consultancy services, provision of equipment and operating costs to configure, install and operate the National Online Distance Education Service needed to support DEPP service delivery of online learning. NODES was to be established in cooperation with OUSL, public and private post-secondary institutions.

To assist in the design, implementation and transfer of technology to develop online learning, international and national consultants were deployed to work in five clusters – Distance Education, Education and Training, Course Design, Tutors and Mentors and Marketing and Administration. The tasks to be accomplished during the project period were

1. Distance Education: The development of an appropriate model for open and distance learning for Sri Lanka, preparation of the master plan and implementation procedures for DEPP to operate distance education programmes through the NDEN system.
2. Education and Training: Undertake a thorough analysis of training needs, develop a training plan and implement professional development programmes in all aspects of distance education.
3. Course Design: create the capacity within public and private post-secondary institutions to plan, design, develop, adapt and deliver distance education diploma and degree courses through online or other distance education strategies.

4. Tutors and Mentors: Assess the required knowledge and skills of tutors and mentors, develop job descriptions, undertake training programmes, and create training materials and present a plan for recruiting, selecting and monitoring performance.
5. Marketing and Administration: Analyse the DEPP strategy and service delivery mechanisms and prepare the marketing and administration plan to to operate DEPP cost effectively and train local staff in all aspects of developing marketing and administration.

The National Distance Education Network (NDEN) was responsible for developing the National Open and Distance Education Service (NODES) infrastructure – the NODES Central including a Network Operations Centre, a Content Development Unit, a Demonstration Network Access centre (DNAC) and a Help Desk Centre and NODES Access Centres (NACs). It was planned to establish 150 NACs in different parts of the country. Existing centres of institutions such as the Open University were to be used and facilities were to be provided through provision of equipment and connectivity

Implementation of Identified DEPP Activities

Prominent among the Milestones achieved by the DEPP are development of

1. An appropriate ODL model for Sri Lanka,
2. A Master Plan and implementation procedures for DEPP to operate DE programmes through the National Open and Distance Education Service,
3. Training manuals on Writing for the Web, Course Design and Migration, and Multimedia development,
4. A Marketing and Administration Plan, and
5. A strategic plan to sustain management and maintenance services of NODES.

Achievement of Expected Outcomes

The Distance Education Partnership Programme (DEPP) under the Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) has supported a number of universities and professional associations in Sri Lanka to develop and deliver demand-driven programmes of study through the provision of Matching Grants. The Matching Grant covers expenditure on design and development of online courses and materials, purchase of computers, equipment and software, connectivity and links with foreign universities and higher education institutes.

Extensive support was given to prepare the selected institutions to launch these programmes. The following table shows the types of training provided.

Aspect of Training	No. Trained
Postgraduate Diploma in Distance Education – IGNOU	09
Course Design & Development	182
Writing for the Web	75
Moodle Administration	49
Online tutoring & Mentoring	139
Marketing	21
Awareness Raising on Social Marketing	191

By the end of 2007, the major activities of NODES had been implemented and 11 NACs were in operation with two in Colombo district and one each in nine other districts. The fully-fledged Demonstration NAC houses the Content Development Unit with four trained staff members. The National Distance Education Service was ceremonially launched on the 26th of February, 2008.

At the pilot stage four universities: (Open University of Sri Lanka, University of Jaffna, University of Moratuwa and University of Peradeniya), one public institution (Sri Lanka Institute for Development Administration) and two professional associations (Institute of Quantity Surveyors of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka Library Association) are participating in the DEPP. The programmes being developed are in business and public management, information technology, librarianship, quantity surveying, and educational technology. Four of these programmes/courses are currently being offered and the other three are due to commence within this year.

Sixteen other partner institutions, the majority of whom are private institutions also are joining the programme in 2008 to offer diverse programmes in the fields of human rights, continuous professional development in medicine, Information Technology, teacher education, disability education, naval studies and bio-engineering

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PLANS

One of the important outcomes expected from the Distance Education Partnership Programme was to provide opportunities to a larger percentage of the AL-qualified youth to obtain demand – driven and relevant qualifications. While the motivation for public, professional and private institutions to embark on online learning is clear and this would undoubtedly be an unprecedented novel initiative in higher education in Sri Lanka, at present the number of students that will be

enrolled by the institutions would be much smaller than anticipated. This is partly due to the caution exercised by the institutions in experimenting with this new mode and partly due to the hesitation of the clientele to enroll in programmes the effectiveness of which they are uncertain about. In addition, the fact that these programmes would charge fees unlike state university education which is totally free would to some extent affect enrolment. The availability of a Stipend for those who are economically disadvantaged, however, could overcome the barrier of fees and attract students from such backgrounds to enroll in the online programmes.

A prime objective of the Project was to extend opportunities to the rural poor. The programmes currently being offered, however, are in the English medium. This limits access to online learning for a considerable proportion of GCE (AL) qualified youth who have received their education entirely in the mother tongue. With the translation of the Learning Management System that is being used, Moodle, into Sinhala and Tamil, the local languages, more institutions will offer programmes in these two languages and thus increase access to online learning. The establishment of the NODES and its Access Centres, dispersed in all parts of the country would help achieve this goal together with programmes offered in national languages.

The extent to which employability of those who receive a higher education is improved, can only be assessed after the online learners complete their programmes and enter the labour market. Yet it is possible to forecast with a certain amount of reliability that these young persons would have a better chance to compete with their peers for employment. Most of the programmes being developed by the partner institutions are in areas for which there is a demand, such as Information Technology (for which only about 20% of the demand is satisfied by existing programmes), management, and continuing professional development. The fact that these programmes are at present offered in English and using the online mode also gives these graduates an edge over their competitors in the search for jobs as these are competencies that employers, especially in the private sector are asking for. These programmes also focus on the employment markets overseas such as Maldives, and the Middle-East in which the demand for professional jobs is now increasing. It is also envisaged that the necessity to engage in self-learning and active learning rather than depend on the transmission mode and passive learning as in traditional classes would give these online graduates and diplomates an advantage.

Second challenge is to motivate the partner institutions, especially the public institutions, to expedite the design and development of online programmes. Being a novel venture, in which they lacked prior experience, the staff in the partner institutions, find it difficult to change their mind-set away from traditional, teacher-directed lecture-mode accepted as an easy mode of delivery to a student-directed, interactive online learning, especially in the context of a heavy work

load. The turn-over of staff trained to contribute to online learning from the partner institutions also has added to their woes, even though from the point of view of the project those trained represent an investment for the nation. The solution here is perceived as to encourage the partner institutions to hire course developers or purchase material and adapt for contextualization. It is likely therefore, that the original target of launching 150 online programmes might be reduced to a feasible number of 40 programmes.

The magnitude of the issue is revealed by the fact that only a negligible number of courses have met the stringent quality assurance standards of External Evaluation, prescribed by the DEPP even though Course Integrity Evaluation and Informal Evaluation by local consultants have been carried out.

Overall, the DEPP can be confident about the establishment of the NODES, the Content Development Unit, training that has been carried out which is truly a national investment to take the project forward. A streamlined marketing programme is also underway to raise awareness about online learning coupled with a career guidance initiative focusing on GCE Advanced level students. Above all, the introduction of online learning especially to public institutions can be acclaimed as a landmark event which would gradually have a multiplier effect on transforming the attitudes of the faculty.

Secondly, the four programmes currently being offered are in the English medium. This limits access to online learning for a considerable proportion of GCE (AL) qualified youth who have received their education entirely in the mother tongue. With the translation of the Learning Management System that is being used, Moodle, into Sinhala and Tamil, the local languages, more institutions will offer programmes in these two languages and thus increase access to online learning.

At this point, it is pertinent to focus attention on what made Asian Development Bank support the Distance Education Modernization in Sri Lanka. In 2000, ADB summed up the quality of Sri Lanka's education as "On the whole, a rigid and outdated educational system persists anchored on outmoded teaching and learning methodologies, rote learning, lecture notes, traditional curricula and inadequately localized textbooks". It is our belief that even though progress towards making the change is slow and painful, the project will ultimately achieve the objectives set out to achieve.

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