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# **AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY OF THE BUSINESS PROCESS RE-ENGINEERING (BPR) MODEL TO ADDRESS OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA**

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## **Abstract**

*As a premier Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Sri Lanka the Open University (OUSL) has completed more than three decades of national service to provide a second chance to those who have missed opportunities for higher education on account of social, political, employment or others reasons. However in the recent years the OUSL has been confronted by challenges arising from internal deficiencies on the one hand and changing ODL technology and competitive forces on the other. These challenges demand new ideas, vision and management solutions to decisively address administrative, operational and planning lapses to ensure that the needs of our immediate and ultimate customers are satisfied. Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) is one of the time tested tools to address such complex situations. This paper evaluates a pioneering effort made by the OUSL to introduce a combination of BPR and Business Process Improvement (BPI) initiatives during the past one year to ascertain its impact on business processes and customer satisfaction. The paper shows that the BPR initiative has been able to accomplish some of its declared objectives. Whereas the pre-project conditions generated unnecessary congestions, delays, apathy and systems failures causing learner (customer) dissatisfaction the post-BPR/BPI changes have significantly improved its processes and delivery benchmarks.*

## **Introduction**

The higher education sector in Sri Lanka is poised for a transformation. This transformation would reflect its response to the growing aspirations of real and potential beneficiaries, concerns of main stakeholders regarding quality and relevance of education as well as the changing structure, composition and competencies of educational providers.<sup>1</sup> However, the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) which was one of the most established players herein was fraught with inertia, causing problems associated with administrative, operational and planning lapses and delays. These deficiencies have had adverse effects on the learning and teaching ambiance of the University resulting in mounting discontent among learners and academic staff.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *This is reflected in the number and variety of players advertising in the weekend news papers and their advertisement budget. For instance, the total advertisement earnings pertaining to the Sunday Observer News Paper alone was estimated to be Rs. 6-8 billion per issue.*

<sup>2</sup> *It was revealed that much of the productive time of the Senior Management and the Council of the University was spent on crisis management rather than planning, innovation and providing a sense of direction to the University.*

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This was a situation least anticipated in a 'hostile market' environment. Although the OUSL is a national university, it has to compete for potential clients and also retain existing learners.<sup>3</sup> These two aspects of learner management are symbiotically related as the 'word of mouth' of unsatisfied learners viciously undermines the OUSL's modest promotional campaigns to attract new clients.<sup>4</sup> When the market is naturally volatile and aggressively competed by a range of players, the OUSL has a major challenge of putting its own house in order. In such a scenario, there is no room for operational problems and apathetic behaviour. These two conditions compel the OUSL to change its approach with regard to management of work processes and approaches, and embark on a determined venture of "re-engineering" its work processes and tactics.

### **Literature Review-brief resume**

Given the urgency and enormity of her problems, it was found that muddling through to address the issues pertaining to business processes, programmes and approaches to problem solving can be unreservedly counterproductive. At this stage, it is important to briefly document some of the major issues that remained unsolved and hence causing operational impasse by mid 2009. These issues recurred in the administrative minutes of the Faculty Boards, Operations Committee, Academic Senate and the Governing Council regularly. For instance, the time gap between programme advertising and recruitment for many academic programmes exceeds nine months.<sup>5</sup> This had to be assessed in a context where many other players compete for the same market recording less than three months of lead time for student recruitment.

Besides, learners registered after many months of waiting, were denied their required study materials owing to delays in printing and distribution. These delays extending to two to three months interfered with the academic calendar and programmes taking longer than expected to complete.<sup>6</sup> As all the major programmes were advertised almost simultaneously, the service providers were under severe pressure with respect to printing books, processing student files and conducting admission/grading tests on time. The congestion at the Colombo regional centre with regards to class rooms and examination halls was

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<sup>3</sup> *As for the conventional universities, students are allocated by the University Grants Commission (UGC) which also provides finances to meet both recurrent and capital costs. The OUSL on the other hand has to recruit students from among employed adults by advertising its study programmes and collect tuition fees to meet the all costs other than salary costs of her permanent staff.*

<sup>4</sup> *It has been stated that bad experience of current customers can be more damaging than the pleasant experience with respect to 'word of mouth' adverse publicity.*

<sup>5</sup> *Some of the conspicuous delays were reported in the English for academic purposes and LLB.*

<sup>6</sup> *It was reported that printed materials did not reach them even one month after registration. This has upset the learning and continuous assessment timelines, delaying programme delivery and reducing study time.*

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extraordinarily severe. It was, therefore, necessary to approach the situation as a BPR exercise with a view to finding answers to the problems listed above.<sup>7</sup>

It must be stated that the University, during the past six years, invested heavily on infrastructure, upgrading the MIS system, training staff, upgrading the printing press, and augmenting the capacities of laboratories and class rooms under the ADB assisted Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP).<sup>8</sup> However, there was no noteworthy improvement in the OUSL's performance concerning learner registration, pass rates or service quality to substantiate this massive inflow of funds into the system.

This paper defines re-engineering as a "fundamental rethinking and redesign of business processes to achieve improvements in contemporary measures of performance, such as customer satisfaction, cost reduction, quality of services, and the speed of services offered" (Hammer and Champy, 1993). Accordingly, BPR is an ongoing, iterative process, requiring strong commitment and vision from leadership. It deals with radical re-design, transformation and change. Although initiated in the private sector organizations to address issues governing 'customer services', it also encompasses areas such as reducing transaction costs with a view to improving competitiveness in a turbulent market environment.<sup>9</sup>

The BPR exercise, therefore, involves the total creative rethinking of one or more of an organization's key business processes to streamline operations, enhance customer satisfaction and minimize transaction and administrative costs. In this respect, no business assumption or organizational structure is sacrosanct. There are three words that may be seen as objectionable in this narrative, i.e., business, customer and market. Whether we like it or not, we work in an ambiance that is critically competitive and hence, our approach has to be more business like. We do not have a captive audience of learners; hence our learners form a market. These learners are 'adults' who 'purchase our services and so they are customers'. In the OUSL we purposely refer to our students as learners and 'not as students'. Therefore, at least for the sake of survival, the OUSL has to adapt to the sweeping changes that are taking place in the educational sphere.

BPR is not just business improvising. It is an approach of re-designing the way an organization works to support its vision and augment the competitiveness of its operations. Therefore, in an ideal setting, BPR commences with a thorough process of re-visiting its own vision and mission as well (BPR Assessment Guide,

<sup>7</sup> *However, the term BPR was never used to avoid resistance by both academic and administrative staff to any change that interferes with the established order.*

<sup>8</sup> *The total investment under this project on constructions (US \$ 15 Millions), Training of Staff (US \$ 4 Million), Furniture and equipment (1.5 Million), Upgrading the Printing Press ( US \$ 0.7 million), Upgrading the MIS system (US \$ 1 Million), and upgrading the Educational Technology facility (US \$ 2. Million)*

<sup>9</sup> *Transaction costs refers to costs associated with exchange of goods or services incurred in overcoming market imperfections and covers informational cost of finding the price and quality and opportunity costs of time lost owing to delays.*

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US, 1997). Incidentally, the OUSL is preparing its third Corporate Plan 2011-2016, which commenced almost concomitantly thus helping the University to re-visit its vision and mission. The OUSL has assigned a prominent place to improving 'efficiency' and 'excellence' as integral components of its vision. This has helped the OUSL to position its BPR initiative in a broader perspective.<sup>10</sup>

The discussion sessions held at the Senior Management Committee and sub-committees appointed by the governing Council in particular helped the OUSL to identify 'non-value adding work' with a view to obliterating them. One of the best examples of this initiative includes separating program development from delivery, where the former including major aspects of revision of study materials, assessment and quality assurance, was handed over to academic departments, and program delivery including learner registration, time-tabling of face to face sessions, management of day-school academics including their payments, conducting examinations, etc to regional services and other service providers. These changes would be outlined in the ensuing section.

Davenport and Short (1990) argued that BPR provides 'a mechanism to analyse and design of work flows and processes within and outside organizations'. This idea does not preclude the OUSL from using BPR although it does not maintain business relationships with other organizations in a big way. However, there are operations that demand streamlining in order to match the competitive character. This includes downstream planning of regional services and study centres as well as the OUSL's dealings with suppliers and buyers of services pertaining to non-educational services such as the printing press and the educational technology division. These subsystems are currently run sub-optimally.<sup>11</sup>

Parker (1993), on the other hand, highlighted the connection between BPR initiatives and the use of new and enabling technology to provide an explosive and dramatic change throughout the organization. Nonetheless, the current form of compartmentalized and balkanized structure impedes this dramatic change. Two threats to positions have been observed here. Some officers were concerned merely about 'losing authority' exercised for the sake of 'control'. There were others who genuinely feared threat to quality assurance and accreditation. In both cases the answer is not centralization. The BPR exercise should explore novel solutions to these issues using management information systems and monitoring procedures. Once the current information management system (OMIS) is fully operationalized, many of these concerns may be effectively addressed.

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<sup>10</sup> *The vision of the Open University is 'to be the premier ODL institution in Asia through excellence, efficiency and equity in learning research and scholarship'*

<sup>11</sup> *For instance, the investments to improve RES centre network alone was about US \$ 10 billion which is more than double the OUSL's total budgetary outlay for year 2005. However, the student numbers in these regions remained almost static until end 2008.*

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This discussion does not intend to provide 'quick fixes' to the OUSL's complex set of problems outlined earlier. Rather, it was thought that the BPR solution would create a conducive environment to identify the changing roles for holders of various managerial and other positions with a view to revamping the unenergetic procedures, work norms, habit patterns and attitudes. As argued by Earl (1994), it would assist the OUSL to underpin the interdependence of tasks, roles, people, functions and departments to produce a collective whole eventually. It is this collective whole that would be reflected in the OUSL's good will and image in the minds of customers and other stakeholders. To this extent the BPR initiative taken thus far would work as a vehicle of organizational change characterized by strategic transformation of interrelated subsystems to generate synergies and complementarities.

Therefore, the changes envisaged are gradual and incremental. They entail the subsystem of management (style, value, measures), people (jobs, skills, cultures), structures (positions, linkages, teams) and coordination mechanisms (IMS) to offer a timely, complete, and high quality educational service in a competitive environment. Consequently, the ultimate goal of the BPR related process transformation would result in improvements in all major aspects of business processes including costs, quality, customer satisfaction, and /or shareholder value (Kettinger et al 1997). However, the outcome of these changes would be unquestionably radical and structural.

As far back as 2003, a similar BPR exercise was initiated to solve the management problems in the Educational Technology Division.<sup>12</sup> A consultant was appointed and a report was presented to the University. However, the OUSL did not have the foresight to carry out this experiment that would have been cost-effective and also would have provided some lessons of experience to her Senior Management. Instead many more consultancies and committees were appointed and reports produced but none was implemented.

### **The Objectives of the paper**

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

- a) To explain the background that necessitated a BPR scheme at the OUSL with a view to examining whether there was a real need for such an initiative
- b) To document the BPR changes introduced and relate how they are expected to address the problems and issues raised
- c) To assess the response of the Staff to the changes introduced, and
- d) To evaluate the implications on the overall performance of the OUSL with respect to costs, quality and customer satisfaction

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<sup>12</sup> *The University hired an industry expert, Mr. Renton de Alwis, whose report on BPR was shelved without implementing the major proposals.*

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## **Methodology**

The approach of this study was eclectic; it was based on information and insights gathered using discussions with key informants including the members of the Operations Committee, observations of the research team, and insights drawn from answers to a short questionnaire survey conducted among 39 respondents selected randomly. The paper used simple descriptive statistics to analyze and interpret the survey findings. It also used those reports of subcommittees and minutes of meetings extensively. The paper used narrative form to compare the pre-project and post-project situations and their impact on performance.

It must be mentioned that there has been resistance to the modifications proposed at different levels of implementation on account of communication lapses, vested interests and willful non-compliance arising from opposition to any change. However, unlike in a private sector firm, the changes have to be carefully chosen and progressively implemented. The management of resistance too has to be carefully handled as the decision making environment at a university is expected to be free, participatory and democratic.

### **Pre-project environment -complexities and problems**

The pre-project work environment was a painful process of muddling-through with academic coordinators, the student support services staff (SSS) and learners pointing fingers at each other for missions unaccomplished or for delivery failures. There was a set of teething problems having a profound impact on the very existence of the university. Firstly, the University was in a habit of delaying critical activities pertaining to learner registration, academic delivery and examinations. Secondly, arising from the above, it was customary for the University to reschedule its plans and deadlines causing procrastination of her academic deadlines. The end result was a serious credibility loss in the face of her main stake holders, i.e., learners. Thirdly, there was a tense environment in all operations when things failed giving rise to complaints and bitter feelings among agents responsible for academic delivery (such as staff of student affairs, management information systems, printing press, and operations) and academic staff members. Fourthly, much of the time of the senior staff including the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Deans and the Members of the Governing Council was wasted on trivial issues pertaining to those four problems. Fifthly, time loss owing to the audit queries on performance lapses, scrutiny by the Committee of Public Enterprises (COPE) of parliament was tedious. Consequently the University's ability to reach its full potential was denied.

*Table 1-Major Stumbling Blocks and Pitfalls Identified after a Careful Scrutiny.*

No	Scope	Issue	Implication
1	Registration (a)	High profile registrations remained concentrated to the first few months of the year	Over-heating of the system leading to the failure to respond to needs; irregular cash flows causing payment problem
2	Registration (b)	Centralization of registration and dependence on manual operations	Taking a longer time to complete and high costs as staff from the head office had to visit all the centres
3	Printing	Books, brochures never meeting deadlines	Delaying registration, continuous assessment and final examinations
4	Delayed notification	Notices on admission cards, payments, examination time tables, award ceremonies delayed	Poor response as learners did not receive notices before deadlines, failure to raise finances to pay bills, could not get ready for examinations or awards
5	Examinations	Examinations, marking, and evaluations being a monopoly of academics in the central campus	Work pressure causing delays, quality of assessment, inability to provide feedback, not having time for revision of materials and research
6	Continuous assessment	CA handled by the academics of central campus and the CA unit	Centralized CA delays feedback, data validations and assessment marks and eligibility.
7	Communication	No mechanism to convey decisions of the management to other staff	The gulf between senior management and other staff widened as decisions are not conveyed.

*Source: Discussions with staff and observations of the researchers*

The above table signifies some of the major drawbacks in the system that continued unabated despite the fact that the OUSL had been in existence for almost 30 years. Ideally the staff of the OUSL should be well informed of the modalities of ODL systems and procedures. It was also found that most of the procedures that were in practice were more suitable for conventional universities raising issues of misalignment of ODL model and practices.

It was seen that the OUSL has not been able to adopt and adapt appropriate management and technological innovations that have been widely practiced in the other ODL universities in different parts of the world. This development is amusing as the ODL model is well established and many of these staff members have had the privilege of visiting other ODL universities in Asia.

### **Implications of the changes introduced**

The discussion above showed that the problem at hand was deep-rooted, structural and systemic. The implications of these shortfalls were adverse affecting

the timely delivery of the OUSL's services, cost, service quality of operations and customer satisfaction. A few studies conducted and reports presented to different fora earlier underscored these defects. These studies invariably helped the University to establish a set of benchmarks for BPR related work processes, time lines, rescheduling of activities and institution of a clear division of labour.

Table 1 and 2 may be construed as simple commonsense although the problems continued for years while the systems and processes that were dysfunctional continued unabated. Ironically, what has been happening at the OUSL was incongruous with the established ODL practices which are well documented in the literature. The culture that was embedded for years at the OUSL had created a situation where the staff members including the academics, administrators and support staff wanted to maintain the status-quo despite the fact that it did not work. Moreover, it had caused a high financial and transaction cost on the system.

*Table 2- BPR package, its components and linkages with problems identified*

No	Change introduced	Benchmarks	Issues addressed
1	Staggered registration of main study programme (a)	Widen Gap between registration of Law, Science, Engineering, and Education	Congestion of operations / heavy workloads /pressure on Press and Examination halls.
2	Decentralization of registration (b)	All registrations should be handled by the RES Staff	Centralized operations/increased transaction costs to learners/frustration among RES staff/ data validation problems
3	Press empowered to do its work	All books should be printed by the time of registration	Meeting deadlines in printing of materials
4	Establishment of process bench marks	Advertisement-Registration gap reduced to maximum three months	Process standardization with respect to timeliness
5	CA to be handled by the RES	Examinations, marking data entry of CA in REs	Low value addition and data validation problems
6	Clear establishment of division of labour	All delivery by RES and other SSS staff	Low value addition and waste of specialized skills
7	Provision of avenues for communication	Activate OUSL bulletin and online information	Messages not reaching the important stake holders on time

*Source: Minutes of meetings of Senior Management and other committees.*

When taken as a composite package, these changes are far-reaching and structural. It is because of this overarching character of these changes that they qualify to be a business process engineering (BPR) initiative. More importantly, the general and specific implications of the changes as listed in Table 3 show that they have the capacity to address most of the major pitfalls of the ODL system at the OUSL.

The changes as presented above have three broad components. Firstly, they are very specifically aimed at establishing the division of labour and specialization. These are the cornerstones of ODL that helped it to break the 'Iron Triangle' of university education (Kanwar and Daniels, 2009). Related to this is the demarcation of functions of development of study materials and assessment as the key functions of academic staff; academic support staff is expected to undertake the delivery of programmes. This is contrary to the established view at the OUSL that academic staff should be multi-skilled and multi-tasked and should undertake the full load of coordination of programmes. Consequently, academic staff gradually seized functions for which they did not have core-competencies and gave up functions they are trained to specialize and also form the integral components of their own career advancement.

*Table 3- The Implications of Seven Changes on Costs, Quality and Speed*

Changes introduced	Implications of Changes			
	General expectations	On costs	On Quality	On speed
<i>Staggered registration of major study programmes</i>	<i>Work pressure falls on printing, physical space, assessments, IT</i>	L	Neutral	H
<i>Decentralization of registration</i>	<i>Minimize delays, facilitate data validation process</i>	L	H	H
<i>Clear establishment of division of labour</i>	<i>Academic staff to concentrate on the development of study materials and quality assurance</i>	L	H	Neutral
<i>Press empowered to do its work</i>	<i>Remove road blocks, assure that raw materials available/ books printed on time</i>	L	H	H
<i>CA to be handled by the RES</i>	<i>Reduce marking, data entering validation problems and enable feedback to teachers/learners</i>	Neutral	H	H
<i>Establishment of process benchmarks</i>	<i>Reduce gaps between advertising and registration, examination and results, marking and feedback</i>	L	H	H
<i>Provision of avenues for communication/feedback</i>	<i>Minimized delays in sending vouchers /admission cards and reduced learner attrition</i>	Neutral	Neutral	H

*Source: Observations and discussions with major stake holders*

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Secondly, these changes envisaged the decentralization of delivery of study programmes to the regional and study centres. The OUSL has heavily invested on the development of this infrastructure and institutional mechanisms and there is a team of core staff who is committed to undertake activities such as learner registration, coordinating day-classes utilizing local resource personnel, conducting tests and examinations, marking scripts and entering marks. By denying these activities to them, the university has made RES work unrewarding and work pressure on the staff of the central campus acute (Ranasingha et al, 2010).

Thirdly, the changes have indicated specific benchmarks pertaining to registration of learners (reduce lead-time to three months), printing and delivery of books (Two weeks before registration), posting payment vouchers to learners (two weeks before the deadline), learner feedback on CA (one month after the submission), etc. with a view to upgrading the quality of student support services and speed of operations so that more time may be available for learning rather than administrative routines (Corporate Plan, OUSL, 2011-2016).

The table 3 above signifies the re-engineering of business processes (BPR) introduced to address these problems and their implications on cost, quality of services, speed of delivery and benefits accrued. The implications listed and the assessment outlined were the perceptions of those who were directly involved in the delivery of these activities.

It is seen that five (5) out of seven (7) changes have a discernible impact on cost reduction while two (2) others are cost neutral. The aspect of cost includes both financial costs to the university and transaction costs to learners. The cost to the University is intensely felt when the concentrated learner registration holds back regular cash inflow to the university during lean months causing intermittent cash-flow problems. The printing process fully streamlined reduces waste and the colossal cost on inventory. Similarly, decentralized registration reduces transaction costs to learners arising from increased costs of travelling to Colombo and back from their homes and the opportunity cost of time lost for working students.

With respect to quality assurance too five (5) out of seven (7) changes have contributed positively to raise both service and product quality. The quality of product refers to the structure and content of courses while service quality refers to timely delivery of study materials. They also cover the service quality such as attendance where the teacher attendance is punctual and productive. The third aspect of “speed” arises from registration, conducting of day classes / examinations and entering marks simultaneously at all centres, which will reduce centralized data processing time to provide more space for studying.<sup>13</sup> Here, all but one change has been neutral; it shows that the BPR package has had a discernibly positive

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<sup>13</sup> *It was found that in many programmes of study the time allowed for learning was gradually reduced to accommodate administrative work such as marking, calculation of eligibility, production of payment vouchers.*

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impact on the speed of operations of OUSL work. One of the major achievements in this respect was that the University managed to print all the course materials on time in the year 2010.

The re-engineering of process (BPR) at the OUSL was initiated at two interconnected levels i.e., changing the vision, policies and strategies of the university at the apex level and establishing mechanisms, bench marks and timelines at the operational levels (Thomas, 1996). Accordingly, the OUSL revised her vision to lay special emphasis on efficiency and excellence. Translating “internal efficiency” into action was brought under the direct purview of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) through the director operations.

There are areas where the financial costs tend to be neutral or even higher initially. For instance, opening new channels of communication (publication of OUSL letters) and feedback (complaints boxes and staff meetings attended by the VC) require new initiatives, investments on equipments and modalities. Similarly, the entering of CA marks of learners registered at the Colombo regional centre may be cost neutral at least financially.

The changes were expected to bring about enhanced outreach (equity) to serve the masses whilst maintaining quality (excellence). This would lead to the breaking of the ‘iron triangle’ in higher education. The approach adopted by the OUSL was bottom up, slow and infusing incremental change to make the BPR less frictional and more workable (Harkness, et al. 1996; Hammer and Champy 1993). It is, therefore, important to examine how some of the main stakeholders respond to these changes. The following discussion outlines the perception of the academic staff members on the BPR initiative of the OUSL.

According to table 4 below, five (5) out of seven (7) changes were known to the majority of respondents who were academic staff members. It seems that some of the communication channels have worked.

**Table 4 –Assessment of Academic Staff Regarding BPR Changes Introduced**

Changes introduced	Fully Aware (%)	No comments (%)	Not Aware of (%)
1 Printing Streamlined	71.8	23.1	5.1
2 Staggered registration	79.4	10.3	10.3
3 Student registration at Regional /Study centre levels	76.9	12.8	10.3
4 Students notified exams / registration dates early	35.9	20.5	43.6
5 Decentralization of programme delivery	25.6	33.3	41.1
6 Examination work at levels 0, 1, 2 in the centres	87.2	10.3	2.5
7 Entering CA marks at the faculties	79.5	10.3	10.2

*Source: Survey data*

Implausibly, two (2) changes were relatively unknown to the academic staff members; this is problematic because there are alternative channels of communication meant to transmit this information specifically to academic staff members. These channels were expected to be free, two way and repetitive. They include Faculty Boards and Senate that are well represented by academic staff members. However, the low responses of 35.9 and 25.6 for items 4 and 5 respectively indicated that some of the major adjustments have been inadequately transmitted to the academic staff members.

This is something that demands urgent attention. Similarly, the fact that about 28 to 17 per cent of the other changes were not properly communicated to the academic staff members also caused anxiety on account of two problems. Firstly, there is a dangerous possibility that these staff members are providing 'wrong signals' to learners and other stake holders in their routine communications and consultations. Secondly, if these changes are not known to the academic staff members, very little can be expected of the administrative and academic support staff that form the direct contact points with learners and other stakeholders.

For instance, when all registration is decentralized to the study/regional centres, the possibility of issuing instructions to submit application to the Central Campus and / or requesting them to be present at the central campus for registration may

be hazardous from the point of view of learners. Similar problems are habitually reported undermining the very objective of increasing efficiency of operation and reduction of transaction costs to learners under BPR. On the whole, it seems that there is a critical need to revamp and strengthen the existing channels of communication and changing their attitudes and perceptions.

*Table 5 Perceptions on the Benefit of Changes*

<i>Changes introduced</i>	<i>Agreed (%)</i>	<i>No comments (%)</i>	<i>Disagreed (%)</i>
1 Printing Streamlined	76.9	15.4	7.7
2 Staggered registration	76.9	17.9	5.2
3 Student registration at Regional / Study centre levels	28.2	56.4	15.4
4 Students notified exams / registration dates early	25.6	59	15.4
5 Decentralization of programme delivery	28.2	61.5	10.3
6 Examination work at levels 0, 1, 2 in the centres	17.9	74.4	7.7
7 Entering CA marks at the faculties	82.1	12.8	5.1

*Source: Survey data*

The situation was even more precarious when the perceptions of teachers were examined with respect to the benefits of changes introduced. Only three (3) out of seven (7) changes have been perceived as beneficial by the majority of academic staff members. This invariably means that there is ambiguity regarding four major changes introduced under BPR. This ambiguity needs to be promptly addressed to avoid any major misalignment with respect to practice of ODL at the OUSL.

Fortunately, the level of disagreement has not been extraordinarily high. Only a few respondents felt that the changes under BPR have not been known and beneficial. The majority was informed about the changes and some members interviewed agreed that they are beneficial. The fact that some were not aware of the benefits suggests that the channels of communication have failed to perform. There is also the possibility that owing to the entrenched "overprotective culture" at the OUSL some of the staff may not be willing to renounce the authority and control they enjoy currently.

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## Discussion of Findings

Quite interestingly, this paper shows an initiative taken by the management of the OUSL to undo some of the established practices that are dysfunctional in an ODL climate. It also shows that the initiative has been able to accomplish several of the declared objectives. The fact that the proposed changes are working is a hopeful sign.

The paper has identified seven major changes introduced by the management of the OUSL during the year 2010. There may have been many other changes that are not considered in this paper. The interpretation of the data and findings must therefore be subjected to the caveats of a) only some changes have been covered by the study b) its methodology was based on documentary evidence gathered from reports, minutes of meetings etc., and b) its sample survey to examine the perceptions of the academic staff members covered only 39 respondents.

Interestingly, there has been a favourable effect on the implementation of decisions and resource use. What has been in practice earlier invariably led to congestion of work, delays, and learner (customer) dissatisfaction which are enormously counter productive in the competitive climate of ODL. Besides, favorable effects were also visible with respect to the benchmarks that have been introduced.

It is ironical to imagine that some of the procedures and systems at the OUSL have continued so long despite the fact that they have been 'proved unworkable'. For example, transporting thousands of answer scripts of levels 0 to 2 to the Central Campus is definitely unimaginative. There have been consultancy reports referring to this type of operation at OUSL as the 'cottage industry model' of distance education.

The above model fails not only because of simple economic reasons but also because of management reasons. Economically, the model cannot be sustained because of its restrictions on expansion. All successful international ODL institutions consider economic threshold in terms of student numbers as critical. Managerially it is difficult because of 'overtrading' of work where some departments are called upon to perform functions that are not humanly possible<sup>14</sup>. Those who suffer most in the short-term are learners. They are denied their books, class rooms, feedback, marks, and eventually certification. There have been years in which no award ceremonies have been conducted. There are courses for which certificates are never issued by the University. In the long run the organization suffers collectively.

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<sup>14</sup>*Transacting more activities than the organizations working capital and resource can normally sustain, thus placing serious strain on work, finances, and risking collapse- <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/overtrading.html#ixzz18pyfNpeC>*

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An outstanding early achievement of the BPR could perhaps be the increase of student numbers with the total enrolment reaching the 30,000 mark by the end of 2010. It is important to note that this increase has mostly occurred in the regions and study centres outside Colombo (CRC) and Kandy (KRC). This is an important accomplishment in relation to expanding outreach and providing equity in access to higher education. It was made possible only because certain established norms, procedures and routines have been changed with a view to increasing efficiency.

In this respect most of the seven changes listed above permeate the domains of internal efficiency; by doing this they also contribute to excellence (product and service quality) as well. Eventually they are expected to bring about a positive impact on cost-reduction, improvement of the quality of services and speed of operations. However, it is naïve to expect that these positive outcomes will emerge liberally free of resistance. Therefore, the senior management of the university has to monitor and review the transformation process, and introduce necessary adjustments. The challenge is enormous as the management has to address the apprehensions and misgivings regarding the BPR initiative and win over those who are unaware of the benefits of these changes.

These outcomes would eventually make ODL a rewarding experience to OUSL's learner population. Those who are registered at the regional / study centres will benefit on account of the falling transaction cost. The falling administrative cost will augment the OUSL's competitive posture while the academia will have more time to pursue their research priorities. Together they will produce synergies necessary to make the OUSL a premier ODL institution in Asia.

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