
PREFACE

International Research Conference on the theme “The Role of Open & Distance Learning in the 21st Century: Challenges and Possibilities” was held on August 20-21, 2010 as a major event connected with the 30th Anniversary celebrations of the Open University of Sri Lanka. The conference attracted over forty research abstracts from academics representing Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and Australia. The abstracts selected through a review process were published in the conference proceedings released at the inauguration of the conference. As a follow up activity, it was decided to bring out a publication consisting of the full papers. About 20 full papers that were submitted were reviewed by a panel comprising professors of the Open University applying criteria such as methodological rigor, empirical content, originality and clarity. The present volume contains thirteen research papers that were finally selected through the review process. An insightful keynote address delivered by Mr. Lalith Weeratunga, Secretary to the President of Sri Lanka aptly sets the background to the conference theme.

Several papers included in this volume review the learning based on the practice of ODL from the perspective of the Open University of Sri Lanka. They also examine the future possibilities of ODL taking into account advances in technology and learner-centered pedagogy. The issue of how best E-learning can be integrated in the teaching-learning process in an ODL environment to bridge the gap between the learner and the teacher and the learners themselves is addressed succinctly in some of the papers. It is accepted that ODL is an empowering mode of learning which applies to all segments in society including those who are differently able or having physical disabilities. The experience of OUSL in reaching and empowering the learners who suffer from such disabilities is discussed in their paper by Theodore Fernando, Thiwankee Wickremasinghe and Indika Bulankulame. It is observed that the constraints associated with the present system of service delivery needs to be removed if the ‘differently able’ learners are to be reached effectively through ODL.

Exploring new technology to reach the distant learners more effectively is indeed a challenge for the teachers who are used to apply print-based teaching material over a period of time. A reflection on teacher’s experience in this regard is an importance source of learning. Gayathri Jayatilleke’s paper reviews the challenges faced by the teachers in adopting an E-learning based knowledge construction model. It is argued that a paradigm shift is required in the teacher’s approach, learning material as well as institutional policies to ensure success of the knowledge construction model. The lessons learned through the application of online blended learning in engineering education are reviewed in her paper by Banduni Liyanage. The paper highlights the importance of sustaining learner’s motivation towards active learning through interaction with the content, teachers

and the fellow learners. Shironica. Karunanayaka and T. Thanaraj, in their paper inquire into design features of online courses adopted in MATE programme conducted by the Faculty of Education of OUSL. The paper highlights the importance of design features in sustaining learner's active participation in the knowledge construction process. S. Somaratne and S.R. Weerakoon discusses the relationship between the course content and the employability of B Sc graduates of OUSL with special reference to Botany courses at levels 4 and 5. The paper attempts to match the course curriculum and employers' expectations and shows that the practical component of the courses need strengthening in order to improve employment prospects of the graduates.

The experience gained through the application of online learning for continuing professional development (CPD) among medical practitioners is discussed in the paper by Nandani De Silva and Geetha Kulasekera. The learner evaluation of online medical education course conducted by the OUSL shows that pedagogy, social environment and technical underpinning should be properly utilized in optimizing learning in an online learning environment. Vathsala Wickremasinghe, in her paper deals with the application of E-learning for employee training in the private sector. The paper shows that compared to traditional approaches, E-learning offers a lot of scope for training of executives and other employees. It is observed that effective design and delivery are two key aspects of online learning that determine the degree of effectiveness of E-learning as a strategy of employee training.

The Malaysian experience in adopting a blended learning model called 'MyVLE' in developing the professional standards among teachers is reviewed in the paper by Maheswari Kandasamy. The paper provides insights into effective adoption of blended learning pedagogy from the perspective of both the adult learners and the tutors. It also emphasizes the importance of effective management of Learning Management System as a means of reaching high quality in programme delivery.

English education has been a subject of interest for teachers, researchers and policy makers as well as students due to the importance attached to English proficiency as a means of greater social mobility. The role played by OUSL during the past thirty years as a pioneer of English language education through the distance mode is reviewed by Hemamala Ratwatte. Her paper examines different type of interactions; teacher and student, student and fellow students, and student and the content (learning material). The paper provides insights into strengths as well as gaps in the teaching and learning process and suggests that there is a need to indigenize the content as well as delivery of English education through the distance mode. Dayalatha Lekamge presents a comprehensive picture of student achievement in English at Grade 10 based on a survey of selected schools. The paper shows that student achievement levels have been far from satisfactory among Sinhala and Tamil medium students compared to English medium students. The paper also reveals that student achievement level is better in those schools that are at the top of the school hierarchy.

A critical assessment of the outcome of application of Business Process Reengineering (BPR) to the management process of the OUSL is undertaken by Upali Vidanapathirana and Nalin Abeysekera who makes a case for radical change in the key processes connected to teaching and learning in an ODL environment. The paper highlights the achievements of the BPR exercise with reference to critical indicators such as improved speed, quality, student satisfaction and cost saving and puts across succinctly the message that ODL institutions have to change if they are to survive in a competitive and hostile education market.

The question of how best computer aided learning can be applied to help learners who are incapable of speech is addressed in the paper authored by Lakmal Mahinda and J.C. Balasuriya. The paper suggests an innovative approach to deal with the problem of recognizing sign language through a computer aided model of communication. Optimizing the use of computers by minimizing wastage of power through innovative approaches is focused in the paper by Settinayake and Balasuriya. The paper proposes a model for PC power management through recognition of facial expression of the user, which has the potential to conserve power and thereby reduce the cost of using computers for educational purposes. As a whole the papers included in the volume contribute towards expanding the reader's horizons on the challenges and prospects of ODL in a changing environment and they also provide insights into practical problems that arise in the delivery of programmes to the satisfaction of different stakeholders.

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