

Challenges in Online learning towards better learning environment: A Case study on Bachelor of Business Management (BBM) Online Degree Programme at University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka is one of the countries to provide free education. The number of higher education opportunities is available to the students. However, a student still has to consider various factors and face many challenges, such as the lack of seats in national universities. The total number of Universities in Sri Lanka is fifteen (15) and nine (9) other Institutions that come under the University Grants Commission (UGC). Nearly 100, 000 students qualify each year to enter the Universities in Sri Lanka out of this around fifteen (15) percentage gain admission to follow the degree programmes. Only a small number among the left outs manage to continue studies at the tertiary level while majority of them are left with no future prospects. Even, the opportunity available to do the higher studies externally is negligible. The government has become increasingly willing to introduce online learning to deliver cost effective, easily accessible and current education to all ages and social backgrounds, on this regards of time, cost and geographical constraints in recent years. In the modern time of education, the rapid growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) leads to tremendously dynamic changes in a variety of tools and technologies applied to the learning process. Online learning has become an omnipresent concept in the time of ICT education and has also been identified as a major mode of learning where learners are able to select the occasion, location and the phase of learning. The University of Jaffna offering to contribute to the development of higher studies in its own way has initiated steps towards the provision of opportunities for higher studies at least to a small section, in the Tamil medium and in this regards the Bachelor of Business Management (BBM) Online Degree Programme has been introduced as an online mode delivery system. Now three batches are going on and around 300 students have been enrolled for this programme but statistics show that drop out rates from online learning courses are much higher than from traditional classroom based courses. In this paper it is argued that one reason for this is that the introduction of online learning and a more student-centred learning model involves a drastic shift for students who are brought up in very teacher-centred didactic educational cultures. This paper mainly focuses on challenges that were come across during the design, development and delivery stages of the BBM Online Degree programme at University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The Case study approach is used as the research methodology and semi structured interviews with students and subject matter experts and observations are used as the data collection techniques. Content analysis is used as the case analysis technique and results revealed the major challenges in online learning in perceptive Student support, Flexibility, Teaching and Learning Activities, Access, Academic confidence. In this paper these challenges will be discussed and solutions suggested. It is concluded that the solutions for these challenges lead to a better learning environment.

Key words: On line learning, Challenges, Student Support, Flexibility, Teaching and Learning Activities and better learning environment.

1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY:

Education is one of the most important factors for poverty alleviation and economic growth in developing countries. (UNDP, 2005, UNESCO, 2005,) Further it is believed that the education helps to empower poor people in developing countries. In the modern environment of education, the growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) leads to tremendously dynamic changes applied to the learning process. There are a variety of tools and technologies are used in the modern education. Online learning has become an omnipresent concept in the period of ICT education and has also been identified as a major mode of learning. In Sri Lanka only 15 % are admitted to the Universities under Ministry of Higher Education out of 100, 000 students who are eligible to enter the Universities with minimum requirements for entering universities due to lack of infrastructure facilities in the Universities (Central Bank, 2006). In recent years, the government has become increasingly keen to endeavour into the possibilities of online learning to deliver cost effective, easily accessible and ever-current education to all ages and social backgrounds, regardless of time, cost and geographical constraints. This is a

door to enrol the students who are unable to enter the universities due to lack of seats. Further, it is observed that many public as well as private sector entities engaged in higher education are moving towards online learning based educational systems in Sri Lanka. Within this context, the Ministry of Education with the help of the Asian Development Bank engaged the online courses to the students. In this regards University of Jaffna introduced a Bachelor of Business Management (BBM) Degree programme as an online education mode in Jaffna University in 2009. This is an external Tamil medium and highly demanded programme within the students. However, Online learning is facing a lot of obstacles and challenges in developing countries (Heeks, 2002, Dhanarajan, 2001, Rajesh, 2003) and drop out rates are much higher compare to traditional classroom-based teaching (Simpson, 2004, O'Connor et al., 2003, Eastmond, 2000). Now three batches are going on and 300 students enrolled for the BBM Online Degree Programme in University of Jaffna and now only 150 students are following the programme. Comparing with the traditional classroom courses these dropout rates are significant. This is a challenge facing by the BBM programme and when we analyse the reasons for these challenge we can observe the challenges and difficulties facing by the students and the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). If the challenges to be eliminated it will be lead to better learning environment and may reduce the dropout rates in future. This study focuses on challenges facing by the students and the SMEs and how that can be led into better learning environment.

However, Sri Lanka is a developing country it gives free education to all people. The admission of the Universities under the University Grants Commission (UGC) is through the results of the GCE A/L Examination, which is a national examination conducted by Ministry of Education and a competitive examination because limited number of students are getting admissions to the universities due to lack of infrastructure facilities in the Sri Lankan Universities. These students follow courses full time on-campus (internal). In addition to these internal degrees they offered external degrees also. The UGC introduced the online programmes to manage the problems regarding limited number of students are admitted to the Universities. Sri Lanka is facing some challenges when it is to incorporate online learning in their education. Interactivity practices play a prominent role and to have computer literacy as precondition to implement online learning. There are difficulties when adapting online learning in to the learning community in Sri Lanka. To implement online practices in Sri Lanka, the target participants need to have knowledge in English Language, computer literacy, technology and design of the system should simple as possible (Gunawardana, 2005)

The BBM Online Degree Programme is conducted by the University of Jaffna (UOJ). It is a three (3) year external degree programme and the students have the option of continuing or leaving the programme on the completion of each year with certification. If the student achieves above a minimum criteria in their examination, who is awarded the Certificate at the end of the 1st year and the Diploma in Business Management at the end of the 2nd year and at the end of the final year, he/she will be awarded the degree of Bachelor of Business Management. Although, it faced difficulties it is delivering courses properly throughout the semester. However, in the past years since started the degree programme the dropout rates have been as high as 40% and compared with traditional mode system it is too high. The drop out rate has been identified as a major issue of the BBM online degree programme. The challenges facing by the students and staff have been identified as problem areas during the analysis of the BBM degree programme. In this regards the research problem of this study arises as the following research questions:

What do students in online degree programme perceive as the major challenges in learning activities?

What do academics (staff) in online degree programme perceive as the major challenges in teaching/delivering activities?

The prime objective of this study is to find out the challenges facing by the students and academics. In addition to the prime objective other objectives could be defined as follows:

- To investigate the problems and issues on student support, flexibility, teaching and learning activities, access and academic confidence.
- To find out the solutions to meet these challenges.

2 METHODS AND DISCUSSIONS:

This study based on case study on BBM online Degree Programme at University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The study mainly interpretative by being based on a qualitative analysis of interviews with respondents with semi structured questions, discussions and the observations. The study based on 90 students who are external students from online degree programme in the University of Jaffna from 2nd year and 3rd year onwards. Further the discussions had been made with the SMEs on this regards. In order to understand the major challenges of online learning, students were asked the questions on students

support, flexibility, teaching and learning activities, access and academic confidence etc., The all students have the traditional based experiences so that they were able to identify the differences between online and traditional system and they were asked to write the answers to these questions on blank papers. These responses are referred to in this study. Further, students were asked their opinions and ideas for the challenges which were summarized as solutions with the academics opinions.

3 DATA ANALYSIS:

Student face many challenges however only five (5) challenges which have been discussed in this study and they were directed to response only these. The responses have been collected and coded within five categories which are analyzed under the categories of students' support, Flexibility, Teaching and learning activities, access and academic self confidence. The selected responses have been given in the table format and students' responses have been given in the quotation marks and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) who are the lecturers and tutor mentors' opinions also have been given in the columnar format. Further from the students and staff views the researcher's comments have been summarized as follows:

3.1 Students Support:

The students support is the important matter for the successfully completion of the programme. The student support services include tutoring mentoring, content development, technical support services, interaction with students, administrative activities, etc. From the researcher's past findings of BBM Online Degree Programme students have dissatisfaction on their support services. The following Table 1 illustrates the major challenges on students support identified by the researcher from the respondents' opinions.

Table 1: Challenges on Students support.

| | Students' responses for the questions | Staff Opinions | Comments |
|---------------------|---|---|--|
| Tutoring mentoring | <i>"We are unable to contact with the lecturers who are responsible for the respective courses. If the university arrange day classes frequently it will be useful to us"</i> (student, 2010) | The students' attendance is very low to the day classes only the students who come regularly gain the advantage others loosing the opportunities and we are unable to satisfying all of them. (Lecturer 1) | Most of the students are working people and they have no time to attend to the day school and they will study at the examination time. They will have many doubts and they are unable to contact with the SMEs at that time. |
| Content development | <i>"If all course contents would be uploaded in advance it would be useful to study with planned learning activities because most of us are working people"</i> . (student, 2010) <i>"If there would be an announcement about the activities we can complete it within the deadline"</i> . (student, 2011) | All contents with activities are handed over to the tutor mentors and they will manage everything. (Lecturer 2) We have no specialized knowledge in all courses like Lecturers if we asked them on this regards they do not response immediately. (Tutor mentor 1) | SMEs are unable to change their traditional teaching system immediately to the modern online teaching system and they have no/little awareness on this regards. |

Source : Survey collected data:

The student support activities are all those interactive processes that are intended to support and facilitate the learning process. The students are often confused as to what to learn and how to learn. They are unable to change their traditional learning system immediately as this system is a new one and they have been provided education on traditional mode so far. Further, University arranges the face to face session to the students but the attendance is very low as they have family and workplace commitments. In this situation all students won't come all sessions. The Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle is new one to the staff so that the workshops on LMS were held at University by the trained staff but the staff attendance was very low because of the local resource persons. If there would be outside resource person and nominated

participants attendance would be high. However, researcher's previous study also revealed that the students dissatisfied (50%) with the student support of BBM Programme.

3.2 Challenges on Flexibility:

The researches show that online students perform better if the course is flexible in the matter of timing and assignment choices, if they are allowed to work at their own pace and if they are provided with several modes of education delivery ie, CD, Web, print outs, SMS etc., (Patton, 2000, Delialioglu and Yildirim, 2007, Sankey, 2006). Students want flexible in all sphere. The following table 2 illustrates the challenges on flexibility of BBM Online degree.

Table 2: Challenges on Flexibility

| | Students' responses for the questions | Staff Opinions | Comments |
|----------|--|---|--|
| Anyone | "I was unable to enter the university due to lack of seats in the University because of Competitive G.C.E. (A/L) Examination, but I follow this programme while working". (student 2011) | No age limit to follow this course, but none can follow without minimum requirements". (Administrative Coordinator) | Students can benefited because when they are working or following other courses can follow this. |
| Anytime | "We have to wait for a long time (one year) for the repeat examination". (student 2010) If we are allowed to sit the examination one by one (subjects) it is easy to us to study while working". (2011) | The internal programme's rules and regulations have been followed to all. (Academic Coordinator) | The rules and regulations should be adopted in the University system, but examination results can be released as soon as possible. |
| Anywhere | "We can sit the examination only in Vavuniya Campus if the study centers will be established in various part of the country it will be easy to access. (student 2010) | It is difficult to manage study centers at various part of the country. When we conduct the examination at Vavuniya Campus we face several issues. (Administrative Coordinator) | It will be considered in near future. |

Source : Survey collected data:

Flexibility is important because majority of the students are working or following other courses simultaneously following BBM Programme. But the poorer students are unable to follow or hardworking to finance their studies or studying several courses at the same time to get the maximum benefit in short time. It is difficult to them with inflexible deadline and a great help to them would be to allow repeat exams.

3.3 Challenges on Teaching and learning:

Distant learners feel very distant and their feelings of loneliness and the physical distance they experience. Much research shows that, students in distance mode misses social engagement and a feeling of being involved (Galusha, 1998, Bruckman, 2002, Schrum and Hong, 2002). Students being left to self-studies, feeling separated and isolated, is a commonly stated reason for not passing a course or dropping out. The table 3 illustrates the challenges on Teaching and learning of this programme.

Table 3: Challenges on Teaching and learning

| | Students' responses for the questions | Staff Opinions | Comments |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| Interaction with students | "If there are any questions, or doubts, that arise when studying online learning materials do not help to resolve the problems immediately as in a face to face lecture". (Student 2010) "If we would like to contact with the | "They must attend to the face to face session and they can clear their problems at that time. We are busy at our internal programme and other research works. Tutor mentors can clarify these problems". | The students miss the interactivity like a classroom setting and, above all, the possibility of getting immediate feedback is necessary. Three Online tutors are unable to manage all 3years and they have to be |

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|-------------|---|--|--|
| | <p>respective lecturers over the phone we are unable to reach them” . (Student 2010)</p> <p>We have no technological facilities (video calls/conference) to interact with teachers (Student 2010), (Student 2011)</p> | <p>(Lecturer 3)</p> <p>We don't have specialized knowledge all over the subjects. We will clear some with the help of the SMEs but they do not help us immediately (Tutor mentor 2)</p> <p>We don't have the video call facilities to interact with students. (Tutor mentor 3)</p> | <p>recruited more.</p> <p>The technological facilities are important for the interactivity. For the online learning setup it must be considered in the infrastructure facilities like video, audio etc.,</p> |
| Assessments | <p>“ Some time we are unable to upload the documents assignments with in the deadline due to connectivity problem and other issues on access” (Student 2011)</p> <p>Some time we will be out of the country for our workplace, in this situation we are unable to submit the assignments within the deadline. If we are informed the assignments dates before starting the semester it would be helpful to us to manage our activities properly. ” (Student 2010)</p> | <p>“Continuous assessment would greatly help achieve success at the examinations” But they do not submit all assignments. (Lecturer 4)</p> <p>“Everyone completes their assignments in the last minute so that they face problems” (Tutor mentor 1)</p> | <p>The continuous assessments will help to the students getting good results. Students should pay attention about this.</p> <p>The assignments marks must be displayed in each which helps them getting feedback about their progress.</p> |

Source : Survey collected data:

Self studying students need to develop skills and get support in learning strategies and information literacy. Students should learn how to learn and how to manage time and how to complete their activities within the stipulated time.

3.4 Challenges on Access:

Infrastructure facilities and the connectivity are the important aspects for online learning. These are mostly challenges in the developing countries and until eliminate these challenges the online learning environment can't be better improvement. The following table 4 illustrates the challenges on access.

Table 4: Challenges on Access

| | Students' responses for the questions | SMEs Opinions | Comments |
|----------------|--|---|---|
| Infrastructure | <p>“Some of the parts of our country still do not have electricity. In this situation how can we manage online learning system?” (student 2011)</p> <p>Our LMS system is interrupted frequently and last month also more than two weeks we were unable to access said reasoning that the NODES server is out' (student 2010)</p> | <p>In our country as well, the rural areas don't have electricity facilities and IT. How can we conduct online course? (Staff, External unit)</p> <p>This system depends on the Server from the National Online Distance Education Services (NODES), Ministry of Higher Education, Colombo. If there would be any issues our course interrupted by this. Last month also we face the difficulties and we were unable to serve the students more than 2 weeks and we have to receive so many telephone calls from the students and but the NODES did not give immediate response to this (Moodle Administrator).</p> | <p>Basically all students have access to a computer for their studies. The infrastructural problems concern those living in rural areas mainly refer to Internet not being available and bandwidth problems.</p> <p>Further, if we have own server it is easy to deliver courses to the students by the LMS without interruption.</p> |

| | | | |
|--------------|--|---|--|
| Connectivity | <i>“Bad thing is students in rural area cannot access internet because of the connection speed. And some times students will not able to follow the studies because of this.” (Student 2010)</i> <i>“But there are some things that make us fed up. Like sometimes we have to wait more than 45 minutes to download a study content” (Student 2010)</i> | Connectivity is the big issue in the BBM online Degree course. We have to wait more than 30 minutes for downloading documents and the images can’t say the time. If it will continuously be the drop outs will be high sometime online courses will be disappeared. | Some students access the Internet via an ADSL or broadband connection whereas others use dial-up (modem) connection. Still most students and staff say that it is the speed of the connection that is the major bottleneck. Connectivity also affects <i>where</i> students access the Internet. Even though most students have access to a computer at home, when accessing the Internet the picture is more varying. Here we get a rather equal distribution between the home, training institutes, Internet cafés, university, work places and offices. |
|--------------|--|---|--|

Source : Survey collected data:

Mostly in developing countries face these challenges and Sri Lanka has no exception. However most probably in Northern part of Sri Lanka faces not only these access problem but also face the electricity problem.

3.5 Academic confidence:

Self confidence is important thing to get better outcome in each and everything. In the BBM online degree most of the students have the better results in the G.C.E. (A/L) Examination. It does not matter in these challenges. The table 5 illustrates the challenges on academic confidence.

Table 5: Academic confidence

| | Students’ responses for the questions | SMEs Opinions | Comments |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|
| Quality of students | <i>In Sri Lanka G.C.E. A/L Examination is a competitive examination and however we get good results we are unable to enter the university. BBM is an opportunity to follow our higher degree in our mother tongue (Tamil) (student, 2011).</i> <i>Most of we are the Bank staff and our working time more than 8 hours and we have no time to attend the classes, in this situation we are able to study BBM after office hrs at home. If we get hardworking we can obtain good results (students 2011).</i> | “We are getting the best A level students who are unable to enter the university due to lack of seats and some of them may earn overall GPA more than 3.7 and may obtain first class. (Academic Coordinator) | By opening up the BBM program for more students one will also receive students that attend the external mode because they did not qualify to the university. Whereas this is an admirable effort to disseminate knowledge to more than a selective few it will still be a challenge in future when we have the low infrastructure facilities. |
| Subjects previous studied | <i>“In the business management programme we have to learn more accounting subjects. We have come from other disciplines (arts, science) it is difficult to follow the accounting subjects” (student, 2010).</i> <i>“It is an opportunity to study in Tamil Medium” (student 2011)</i> | We have the management internal Degree programme in English medium. BBM is an opportunity for the students to study in Tamil medium. (Lecturer 5) All disciplines (Arts & Science students) can follow this degree programme (Administrative Coordinator). | This is an opportunity to the Tamil students to study their mother tongue in Sri Lanka. And any disciplines can be enrolled to this programme. |

Source : Survey collected data:

In this area the most challenge is the accounting subjects. If it is considered when making the revision of syllabus students can get more confidence with their learning capacity.

4. CONCLUSION

The problems with education for most developing countries are that admissions to universities are limited and that the people most in need of education are the ones most needed at home or at work. A solution to this problem would be to allow people to learn where they are. Providing better online learning environment is the way to enhance the online mode education as well as the education in the country. From the above analysis it is concluded that the feedback is very important for the better online learning environment. From the feedback it shows that learners prefer online learning mode rather than other modes of learning. Moreover, the results suggest that the tutor mentors/facilitators must acknowledge the learner views and the different behavior in order to provide better learning environment. It is not that far a time that our community will demand for more quality in learning processes that incorporates the online technologies that increase the level of interactivity. Academic institutions should be ready to meet this demand. Students complain about the poor organization and infrastructure facilities of the course which must be considered by the institutions favourably. Students being confused and rather lonely will need clear guidance on all practical issues in order to feel comfortable in distance mode. Students need a fixed schedule and exam dates and if changes are made they need to be informed with long notice. Moreover, the access and the electricity problem is the large barrier above at all which must be considered carefully in Sri Lanka. The implication of this study will help the researchers in future who are willing to do further study on this regards.

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