

Expanding Higher Education: Does the Open University of Sri Lanka Adequately Provide Distance Education Opportunities?

Chitrangani Hewapathirana

Abstract—In Sri Lanka securing a place in a higher education institute has become more and more competitive and as a solution to the demand on the government for higher education opportunities for qualified students. The Open University of Sri Lanka was built up with a goal to provide an opportunity to enter Higher education to a large number of people. The intention of this research is to find out whether the students who get admitted are really gaining a second chance for higher education through the Open University of Sri Lanka. This research has 3 goals. Study the methods of university entrance in Sri Lanka, look into the methods of admissions practiced by the Open University for distant studying and whether these admissions provide a solution to the problem of entrance to the higher education system in Sri Lanka. In this context the documented data and information are primarily used and for analyzing purposes 15 interviews are conducted. According to this information the Open University currently faces 3 problems on its admissions such as Supply being unable to meet the demand, Supply being unable to win the demand it needs and The decrease in the number of student admissions in both methods. As such the Open University is facing the following problems. The primary goals of the university are challenged. Therefore, to overcome these problems, the Open University should come up with a program to increase its student admissions through its 22 centers throughout the country.

Index Terms—Open and distance learning, the open University of Sri Lanka.

I. INTRODUCTION

Human Resource is a very important factor for the development of socio-economic, political, and cultural development in developing countries. To develop the human resource of a country, a proper education system and a methodical skills development and training program is essential. In Sri Lanka, universities considered as the main spring of the emerging culture, economy, human resource development, the future hope and aspiration of people. But securing a place in higher education institutes has become more and more competitive and there is a severe competition for an opportunity to obtain higher education. This fact is clearly visible in the following Table I for the academic year 2012 to 2018.

TABLE I: NUMBER OF CANDIDATES QUALIFIED AND ADMITTED TO UNDERGRADUATE COURSES. ACADEMIC YEAR 2012-2018

| Year | No. of qualified Applicants for admissions | No. admitted | Percentage |
|---------|--|--------------|------------|
| 2012/13 | 144,816 | 24,198 | 16.71% |
| 2013/14 | 143,740 | 25,200 | 17.53% |
| 2014/15 | 149,572 | 25,643 | 17.54% |
| 2015/16 | 155,550 | 29,055 | 18.68% |
| 2016/17 | 160,517 | 30,662 | 19.10% |
| 2017/18 | 163,160 | 31,415 | 19.25% |

| | | | |
|---------|---------|--------|--------|
| 2012/13 | 144,816 | 24,198 | 16.71% |
| 2013/14 | 143,740 | 25,200 | 17.53% |
| 2014/15 | 149,572 | 25,643 | 17.54% |
| 2015/16 | 155,550 | 29,055 | 18.68% |
| 2016/17 | 160,517 | 30,662 | 19.10% |
| 2017/18 | 163,160 | 31,415 | 19.25% |

Source: Sri Lankan University Statistics 2018 [1]

According to the Table I, the percentage of university admission varies from 16.71% in 2012/2013 to 19.25% in 2017/18. Though a slight increase can be seen in annual university admissions, this figure is not prominent enough to say the university admission assures the access to higher education is considerable. This shows that the number of candidates who get admitted out of the number qualified to enter the Universities of Sri Lanka is less than 20%.

During the period of 1999 to 2004, University enrollment elsewhere had increased much faster in Eastern Asia and the Pacific by 75% and the world average by 40%. In comparison, Sri Lankan Universities increased admission only by 18% [2].

“The establishment of first university of Ceylon, the enrollment of only 904 in 1942 had increased to 1294 in 1946/47, 2345 in 1955/56 and 2825 in 1958/59. Thereafter, in 1946/47 the growth of enrollment rose by 22%. Four times the rate of increase in proceeding 3 years. This was the result of the adaptation university free education in Sri Lanka as from 1945 and the full democratization of opportunities for higher education. When the entry into universities 1960/61 of students educated in the national languages the pressure for university places began to unprecedented and even uncontrollable” [3].

This has been apparent in Sri Lanka since the latter half of the 1960s’ decade, from then on, a demand that cannot be met by the traditional university structure of the country has developed. In the field of higher education of Sri Lanka, the state maintains a near monopolistic role, in the provision of education, through the system of universities which comprises 15 universities. Providing access to students at a higher rate of expansion, has been the main challenge which the state-run universities are unable to take on successfully at present.

As a solution to the demand on the government for higher education opportunities for qualified students and the pressure that falls on traditional universities of the country to admit more students, Open University of Sri Lanka

Manuscript received May 15, 2020; revised August 20, 2020.

Chitrangani Hewapathirana is with the Faculty of Education, Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka (e-mail: chewa@ou.ac.lk).

(OUSL) was established in 1980. When planning to establish the Open University of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Higher Education expected to provide opportunities for more than 40,000 students.

“One way of dealing the expansion of university places is to establish the Open University which we begin functioning by a June 1980. By the end of this year, we expect the correspondence courses of the Open University to cater about 8,000 students and by the mid 1980 to about 40,000 – 50,000 students” [4].

The OUSL has tried to increase the gross enrollment through the open and distant learning mode. But, at present, it serves around 40,000 students through its network. The university offers 63 Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Post Graduate Diplomas, Masters and Doctoral programs [5]. OUSL degrees are recognized both nationally and internationally as equal to those offered by any other university under the purview of the University Grants Commission. The prime intention of the Open University is providing a second chance to those who could not enter a university due to reasons beyond their control. The intention of this research is to find out whether the Open University has succeeded in achieving this goal.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Open and distance learning is considered nowadays as the most viable means for broadening educational access while improving the quality of education, advocating peer to peer collaboration, and giving the learners’ a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility for learning [6]. Distance education grew out of the need to meet the educational needs of those who could not be in the same place and time with the teacher. Its aim was to release educational practice from the shackles of the four walls of the classroom and make it accessible to anyone who wanted and had a need for it and not just for those who could offered the time and money. Naidu and Kaeng, stated that distant learning is an attractive field which can offer something to each person and that great ideas like a lifelong learning society could be made a reality with it [7], [8]. Also according to Gonsalkorala, Distance Learning provides a second chance or an alternative chance to those who lost the chance of having an education in their childhood, who were compelled to drop out halfway due to various economic, social or cultural factors as well as those who were faced with the need to achieve a higher level of education such as for career enhancement etc. [9]. Wedameyer who elaborated on concepts of Distance Learning said that no person should be denied of his/her chance for an education because on poverty, geographical isolation, being socially underprivileged, or bad health [10]. The significant of the Open Distance Learning is its ability to offer open and flexible access to learning opportunities to anyone, anywhere, and at any time, which is specially suitable for working adult learners, as well as lifelong learners [11]. O.h. Peters said that in Distance Learning, groups consisting of specialists on the subjects should produce the study material [12]. Lectures and tutorials should be provided by a separate group and there should be proper administration.

“Distance Education aims at making education available at the doorsteps of learner. It takes education to remote places rather than require a learner to come from remote places to any fixed places of learner. Such a reversal of formal education has found a place in society where a very large number of learners are scatted all over the country” [13].

This whole procedure should be controlled centrally with clear specific standards. And if expensive high-priced study materials are to be produced there should be an opportunity to present them to many people and so gain financially. OUSL is the only university in the country that provide learning opportunity to all its students almost at their doorsteps, through the network of regional and study centers spread throughout the country [14]. Based on these concepts the Open University of Sri Lanka should be able to present its syllabuses to many students.

III. OBJECTIVES

- 1) Reviewing the current issues pertaining to the university entrance in Sri Lanka
- 2) Examine how these issues are rectified through the open and distance methodology by the Open University of Sri Lanka.
- 3) Analyzing the impact of the Open University approach to increase access to higher education through Open and Distance Learning methodology.
- 4)

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research is primarily based on documentary data, and to further analyze these data interviews were conducted. Therefore, this research has used mixed methodologies. Here all the programs of the 5 faculties of the Open University of Sri Lanka were taken into consideration and the sample was selected from a purposive sample.

A. Sample Program Selected for the Research

Admission to open universities are done under two methods. One is to hold a competitive exam and the other is to admit all applicants who have the necessary qualifications.

TABLE II: SAMPLE OF SELECTING PROGRAMMES

| The method of selecting programs | Quantity |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| Admissions through competitive exams | 03 |
| Admissions without competitive exams | 02 |
| Total | 05 |

In this way it is attempted to keep a balance of both types of programmes as is shown in Table II. These data were further investigated via interviews with 10 program coordinators and education officers and all these data were analyzed through charts, percentages and in detail.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

Under the admission through competitive exams, the researcher selected the Business Management degree

program, LLB degree program and Postgraduate Diploma in Education degree program. The number of applicants and calls for registration from 2012 to 2015 is as follows:

A. With Competitive Exams

TABLE III: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT DEGREE PROGRAMMES FOR 2012-2015

| Year | Number of applicants | Called for registration | Percentage (%) | Number of registrations | Percentage (%) |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 2012 | 2309 | 1378 | 60 | 880 | 64 |
| 2013 | 2961 | 1398 | 44 | 774 | 67 |
| 2014 | 3384 | 1463 | 43 | 1027 | 70 |
| 2015 | 2947 | 1400 | 47 | 972 | 69 |

According to the Table III, the above data on the Management Degree program, the percentages called for registration in years 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015 are 60%, 44%, 43% and 45% respectively out of which only 64%, 67%, 70% 69% were registered. This figure shows that, even though the demand has been increased from 2012 to 2015 annually, and considerable the number of students who got access the programme has been decreased.

TABLE IV: POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION FOR 2012-2015

| Year | Number of applicants | Called for registration | Percentage (%) | Number of registrations | Percentage (%) |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 2013 | 6517 | 2821 | 43 | 2292 | 81 |
| 2014 | 7170 | 3341 | 47 | 2767 | 82 |
| 2015 | 8701 | 3739 | 43 | 3129 | 83 |

For the Post Graduate Diploma Programme presented in the Table IV, 43%, 47%, and 43% were called for registration in years 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively out of which only 81%, 82% and 83% respectively were registered. This is very popular programme among applicants to the Open University of Sri Lanka with a high demand, the number of applicants increases immensely each year, but the university keeps percentage of admissions fixed below 50%. Similarly, for the Law degree as the Law entrance exam in years 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015, the percentage of students called for registration were 11%, 7%, 13%, and 7% respectively, out of which only 86%, 90%, 72%, 80% respectively were registered.

These figures clearly show that the number of students who were not called for registration was larger than the number that got called even though they have the necessary qualifications. The fact for more concern is that out of the students who did get called for registration 30% of Management students, 10% of Law students and 15% of Post Graduate Diploma students have not registered for the programs.

B. Admissions without Competitive Exams

TABLE V: DEGREE IN ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY FOR 2012-2015

| Year | Number of applicants | Called for registration | Percentage (%) | Number of registrations | Percentage (%) |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 2012 | 1102 | 1100 | 99.8 | 788 | 72 |
| 2013 | 1587 | 1587 | 100 | 1000 | 63 |
| 2014 | 2020 | 2064 | 99.7 | 1046 | 51 |
| 2015 | 1790 | 1793 | 99.8 | 867 | 48 |

For the degree in Engineering and Technology all applicants who possessed the necessary qualifications were admitted without a competitive examination, but based on the Table V, 99.8%, 100%, 99.7% and 99.8% were called for registration in years 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively, but only 72%, 63%, 51%, and 48% actually registered and these percentages have kept on decreasing over the years.

TABLE VI: POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN SPECIAL NEED EDUCATION FOR 2014-2019

| Year | Number of applicants | Called for registration | Percentage (%) | Number of registrations | Percentage (%) |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 2014 | 196 | 196 | 100% | 113 | 58% |
| 2015 | 200 | 200 | 100% | 98 | 49% |
| 2016 | 59 | 59 | 100% | 27 | 46% |
| 2018 | 89 | 89 | 100% | 42 | 47% |
| 2019 | 74 | 74 | 100% | 41 | 55% |

TABLE VII: ENTREPRENEURSHIP FOUNDATION COURSE 2016-2018

| Year | Number of applicants | Called for registration | Percentage (%) | Number of registrations | Percentage (%) |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 2016 | 1034 | 1034 | 100% | 589 | 57% |
| 2017 | 1693 | 1693 | 100% | 1090 | 64% |
| 2018 | 985 | 985 | 100% | 616 | 63% |

Based on the Table VI, aforementioned data on the Post Graduate Diploma in Special Need Education, 100% applicants called for the registration for the period of 2014-2019, but out of which only 58%, 49%, 46%, 47%, and 55% registered respectively. No. of registered students also decreased from 113 to 41. There was not any intake taken for the year 2017.

According to the Table VII, the above data on entrepreneurship foundation course, 100% applicants were called for the registration but around 60% applicants were registered.

Likewise, Diploma in Pre-school Education in years 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, called percentages for registration were 100%, 77%, 100%, and 100% respectively, but actual registrations were 54%, 63%, 58% and 57% respectively. According to these figures although for these programs all

the applicants who had the necessary qualification were called for registration there was a probability of about 50% of the students not getting registered.

This clearly shows that in both methods of admission only 50% of the selected applicants get registered.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

- 1) By not giving the opportunity to all the qualified students who apply for popular programs, The Open University of Sri Lanka has failed to match the supply to the demand of those programs.
- 2) When it comes to less popular programs, The Open University of Sri Lanka has failed to win the demand to match the supply it could provide.
- 3) Over the years the number of student admissions has shown a decreasing trend.

Through the analysis of interviews conducted it was understood that, the Open University was compelled to cut off the number of admissions due to the fact that it does not practice distance learning methods fully and as a result, the open university is facing the following problems; The primary goals of the university are challenged, the norms of distant learning have become absent, large scale benefits are not obtained, increases in unit cost (course fees) and overall cost, not inability to make the optimum use of physical and human resources (lecturers, libraries, laboratories, and knowledge), and the recurrence of problems pertaining to higher education entrance and as a result, admission opportunities not being filled to full capacity.

The Open University of Sri Lanka was built up with a goal to provide an opportunity to many people to enter Higher education through Distance and Open learning. But it is obvious that today, out of those qualified applicants, the number of people who does not get selected is way higher than those who get selected making the hope of gaining a higher education a dream never to come true to those who could not enter a university due to reasons beyond their control.

Therefore, to overcome these problems, the Open University should come up with a program to increase its student admissions through its 22 centers throughout the country. In the OUSL strategic plan 2016-2020, under its goal number 4, the university plans to widen access to education and increase opportunities for lifelong learning.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- [1] University Grant Commission, *Sri Lankan University Statistics 2018, Sri Lanka*, 2018, p. 19.
- [2] W. Weerasooriya, *C.W.W.Kannangara Revisited Quality Education in Higher Education*, Colombo: Deepani Publishers, 2007, p. 10.
- [3] A. D. V. D. S. Indraratna, *Economics of Higher Education in Sri Lanka*, New Delhi: NAVRAWG, 1992, p. 11.
- [4] D. C. S. T. Kalpage, "University education," *Seminar Report on National Science Council of Sri Lanka*, p. 1, 1990.
- [5] The Open University of Sri Lanka. (2014). *Strategic Management Plan 2015-2020*. [ebook]. Nawala: The Open University of Sri Lanka. [Online]. Available: <https://www.ou.ac.lk/home/images/OUSL/publications/SMP.pdf>
- [6] J. Calvert. (2006). Achieving development goals, functions open and distance learning lessons and issues. [Online]. Available: <https://pcf4.dec.uwi.edu>
- [7] N. Somiya, *OUSL Convocation Address*, Nawala: The Open University of Sri Lanka, 2014.
- [8] S. Keegan, *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 62.
- [9] L. R. C. Gonsalkorala, *Distance Education and Its Context in Sri Lanka*, Kottawa: Anuhas Publications, 2016.
- [10] P. Wedameyer, *The Users of Correspondence Education for Post Secondary*, London: Routledge Keegan Paul, 1973, p. 54.
- [11] S. Karunanayaka, "OUSL opened up new horizons for me," *The Open - 40th Anniversary Special Issue*, no. 2, p. 5, 2020.
- [12] O. Peters, "Transforming through open university," *International Handbook of Distance Education of London Emerald*, p. 34, 2008.
- [13] OUSL, *2016 the Strategic Management Plan*, Nawala: The Open University of Sri Lanka, 2016.
- [14] S. Ariadurai, "Learner engagement through enhanced learner support is the key to the future," *The Open - 40th Anniversary Special Issue*, no. 2, p. 3, 2020.

Copyright © 2021 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).



C. Hewapathirana is a senior lecturer attached to the Department of Educational Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka. She was born in Kandy on 21st March 1958. She had a B. com degree in 1982, a post graduate diploma in Education in 1991 and a M.Phil. (education) in 1998 from the University of Peradeniya. After graduation from the University of Peradeniya, she joined the school system as an honors graduate teacher in 1985 and continued till 1999.

Then she joined Sri Lanka institute of Advanced Technological Institute as a lecturer and promoted to the position senior lecturer in 2005. She was then honored in promoting as a director in the same institution in 2009. She joined the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education, Faculty of Education as a senior lecturer in 2011 and became the 1st head of the newly established Department of Educational Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education. Ms. Hewapathirana is an author of a number of publications on Teacher Education and Sociological Foundation. She has been engaged in a number of research studies on Education Management, Open Distance Learning (ODL), Teacher Empowerment and Educational Practice.