

INTRODUCTION OF NEW INNOVATIONS TO CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT: A SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

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INTRODUCTION

Assignments play an important role in promoting two-way communication between the tutors and students who are geographically separated from each other. Depending on the challenging nature of assignments, their turn round time, constructive nature of feedback and objectivity of the assessment, students would not only be retained in the study programmes but also they would complete the programmes in a successful manner. Further, feedback would nurture several levels of learning support such as affective, cognitive, meta-cognitive, motivational and social levels which matters in distance education (Dionne et al :1999, Deschenes, Gagne, Bilodeau and Dallaire: 2001). On the other hand, teachers would be able to know the effectiveness of the instructional material and methodologies used, strengths and limitations of their students and their progress during a particular period of time through the assignments. As such, the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions should establish systematic mechanisms to facilitate the two way communication through assignments in order to provide the intended benefits to both parties.

A number of research studies (Jayathilake, 1997, Jayathilake & Lekamge, 2002) which focused on the CA mechanism of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme of the Open University of Sri Lanka, had identified several problems and issues experienced by all stake holders and recommended long term and short term measures as solutions to those problems. As a result, the Faculty has devoted a considerable amount of its staff time to introduce several procedures which would have a direct impact on improving the quality of the CA mechanism. Those procedures included maintaining a participatory approach to setting and finalizing the assignments by course teams, conducting training programmes annually for marking examiners, decentralizing marking of assignments under assignment co-ordinators, monitoring marking with the support of assignment co-ordinators based at centres and conducting assignment-based day schools at least one per course. However, no extensive study has been carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of those new strategies introduced to the CA component of the PGDE programme. Therefore, an exploratory research study was designed and carried to identify the impact of the interventions on different stake holders, their strengths and limitations and to make suggestions for further improvement of the CA mechanism.

The following research questions were formulated in line with the main objective of the research study.

1. How far the participatory approach has been adopted by the faculty staff to develop the assignments?
2. How far the participatory approach has improved the quality of the set assignments?
3. How effective is the training mechanism implemented by the Faculty to train marking examiners?
4. How effective is the conduct of assignment-based interactive day schools to improve student learning?

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5. How far the centre co-ordinates have made an impact on improving marking of Assignments at centers

METHODOLOGY

The sample of the study included 290 Sinhala and Tamil medium student teachers registered in four regional centres namely Colombo, Matara, Jaffna and Kandy and two study centres namely Kurunegala and Batticalloa, 104 marking examiners, 21 visiting academics and 9 centre co-ordinators. Further, 6 course team members of the selected courses were also incorporated in the sample. It was assumed that the representative nature of the sample would permit researchers to generalize the findings for the total population.

In line with the survey research design, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were applied for data collection and data analysis of this study. A mixed approach which combined questionnaires, interview schedules, focus group discussions and observation schedules were used for collecting data from the relevant stake holders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1.USE OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Through the exploratory interviews conducted with two course teams and the Assignment Co-ordinator of the Programme, it was evident that they were aware of the positive impact of the Course Team approach to the development of assignments, assignment-based interactive day schools and marking schemes. However, due to various reasons, academics had deviated from the said approach. It was further revealed through the discussions that only a few young members shoulder the responsibility of developing those material and they are supported by senior academics at the finalization stage.

The analysis of assignments used for the last two years (2011/12 and 2013/14) in relation to three subjects of the programme had revealed drawbacks in the format, practical nature, cognitive levels, novelty and challenging nature of assignments which could have been avoided by using the course team approach.

Table 1- Analysis of Assignments- 2011/12 and 2013/14

Aspects	ESP 2201	ESP 2202	ESP 2204
Format	Part I= 5 Qs Part II= 1	Part I= 5Qs Part II- 2	No parts 2 Qs only
Practical Nature	High	Low	Low
Cognitive levels	Both lower and higher levels	Mostly lower levels	Mostly lower levels
Novelty	All new	Some questions repeated	Some questions repeated
Challenging nature	High	Low	Low

Further, the analysis had revealed several problems in the coverage, wording and typography of assignments.

2. EFFECTIVENESS OF THE TRAINING WORKSHOPS CONDUCTED FOR THE MARKING EXAMINERS

The department conducts training workshops each year for all assignment marking examiners to familiarize themselves with their roles. It was assumed that their perceptions would provide a valid evidence for the effectiveness of the new procedures introduced.

Table 2- Perception of marking examiners on the aspects covered in the Training workshop

Aspects	Not satisfied	Moderately Satisfied	Fully satisfied	Total
(a) Introduction about the role of marking examiners	21	33	50	104
(b) Explanation given on the process of marking assignments	17	46	41	104
(c) Description about the guidelines of marking assignments	17	46	41	104
(d) Procedures to be followed to reduce variations in marking	23	46	35	104
(e) Advice on how to make comments on assignments	21	48	35	104
(f) Experience gained about the assignments and marking Schemes	17	54	33	104

As illustrated in Table 2, the number of marking examiners who were fully satisfied and moderately satisfied with regard to aspects covered in the training workshop were somewhat similar. However, it was evident that more than 1/3 of them had a negative perception with regard to all six aspects. This investigation was conducted soon after the training workshops have been conducted centre wise. Therefore, it was assumed that the marking examiners had provided relevant information with a fresh memory.

3. EFFECTIVENESS OF ACTIVITY BASED ASSIGNMENT DAY SCHOOLS (ABADS)

In order to avoid the limitations in the written assignments, Activity Based Assignment Day Schools had been introduced as a novel procedure to the PGDE Programme. The perception of visiting academics regarding the ABADS is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 3-Perception of visiting academics

Aspects	No. of respondents	Percentage
ABADS are more useful for sharing experience and developing soft skills	10	47.6%
ABDAS are more powerful and effective than other day schools	5	23.8%
Students are motivated through ABADS	5	23.8%
ABADS are more relevant and more practical	5	23.8%
Group interaction is very high	4	19.0%
Students are well prepared	9	42.9%
Student participation improved	21	100%

According to the majority of visiting academics ABADS are useful, powerful, effective, motivating, relevant and more practical (Table 3). Further, during ABADS the preparation of student teachers (9) and close interaction within the groups (4) were high which could be identified as the indirect achievements of such day schools. It was interesting to note that the student teachers also put forwarded the same view points (Table 4) about the ABADS. The majority of student teachers were either fully satisfied or satisfied with the ABADS.

Table 4- Student teachers perceptions on ABADS

No.	Statements	5	4	3	2	1
6.2	ABADS are having an important impact on us	74	129	28	37	21
6.12	ABADS are more effective than written assignments	151	79	17	11	15
6.13	ABADS are more useful for us	158	73	16	11	17
6.14	ABADS are more effective than written assignments	162	71	16	08	17

1. Highly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neither disagree/Nor agree 4. Agree 5. Highly agree

However, the direct observations conducted by the research team on ABADS had revealed some drawbacks in the way that ABADS are conducted by the visiting academics. Therefore, the benefits for student teachers, visiting academics and for the institution could be improved through a proper monitoring and supervision mechanism.

4. IMPACT OF THE CENTRE CO-ORDINATORS ON STREAMLINING THE PROCESS

In relation to the PGDE programme, there are temporary co-ordinators appointed for each regional or study centre to streamline the distribution and marking of assignments and return of assignments to students. The interviews conducted with them had revealed a positive picture about their contributions. However, the analysis of comments on assignments revealed several problems pertaining to marking of assignments and giving feedback on assignments. As immediate counterparts, coordinators had not taken necessary steps to improve the existing situation. The contributions of centre co-ordinators were minimal with regard to monitoring of marking, provision of feed back for marking examiners and reporting to the Faculty about the problems of marking of assignments.

Observations of marked assignments had revealed that a considerable number of marking examiners were at a moderate level in giving positive feedback (9/22), indicating correct answer (11/22) and directing student teachers for further learning (12/22) which could have been improved through the mediation of the centre co-ordinators.

CONCLUSIONS

There are substantial improvements in the CA mechanism of the PGDE Programmes when compared with the previous findings reported by Jayathilake & Lekamge(2002). However, it is observed that the inability to follow the course team approach by the faculty staff led to various limitations in the quality of assignments developed. The perception of marking examinations about the training workshops was positive though there is a need for taking steps for overall improvement of the workshops. From the point of view of visiting academics and student teachers, the Activity Based Assignment Day schools are very effective. If such day schools do not come up to the expectations of the faculty staff urgent action is needed to get them to the right direction. One major recommendation would be to implement a close supervision and monitoring system by the faculty staff on the CA mechanism of the programme.

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