A Study on Student Teachers' Perceptions on the Continuous Assessment Methods of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) is one of the most popular programmes offered by the Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka for graduate teachers with the objective to develop their professional skills while they are in the teaching service. The PGDE programme is conducted annually at 18 regional and study centres. This programme is conducted in all three media namely Sinhala, Tamil and English and around 3500 student teachers register for the programme every academic year. Take home assignments and activity based assignment in day schools are considered as the main methods of Continuous Assessment (CA) of the programme. Since there is a large number of take home assignments involved, the Faculty heavily relies on External Marking Examiners for assessing them at different centres.

According to McMillan (2000), assessment enhances teaching and influences student motivation and learning. Navaratna and Silva (2013) recommended that it is needed to educate students on how to use Continuous Assessment as an effective learning tool, especially at the commencement of the program. A number of research studies (Lekamge and Jayathilake 2002, Lekamge *et. al.* 2013)) has been carried out about the CA system of the PGDE programme and they suggest long term and short term measures to address the problems and issues identified.

The Faculty staff has been spending a considerable time discussing possible interventions to improve the quality of the CA component and some procedures such as participatory approach to set and finalize the assignments, conducting training programmes annually for marking examiners, decentralizing the marking of assignments under the monitoring of assignment coordinators and activity based assignment for each course have been introduced. In 2015, the department of Secondary and Tertiary Education decided to introduce another change to the assessment mechanism of the PGDE programme. Accordingly, the department has introduced Continuous Assessment Test (CAT) for all courses of the PGDE from the academic year 2015/2016, instead of one take home assignment. CAT was conducted at every Regional and Study Centre on the same date and time. After introducing CAT no extensive study was carried out to

evaluate the effectiveness of the new mode of assessment introduced in the CA component of the PGDE programme.

1.1 Objectives of the study

The exploratory study was conducted to identify the strengths and limitations of the new intervention and to make suggestions for further improvement of the CA mechanism. The following specific research objectives were formulated in line with the major objective of the research study:

1. To identify student teachers' perception about the CA methods used in the PGDE programme;

2. To identify how far the CAT assessment method motivated self-learning practices among the PGDE student teachers;

3. To evaluate the challenges faced by the student teachers to complete the CA components of the PGDE programme;

4. To make suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the CA mechanism of the PGDE programme

2 METHODOLOGY

Quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used in this study within a framework of a survey research design. The population for the study constituted student teachers (3200) who have registered for the PGDE programme for academic year 2015/2016. Six hundred (600) student teachers were selected as the sample. The data were collected using a questionnaire. Three hundred and twenty four (324) returned their completed questionnaires. The questionnaire was structured type and focused on collecting data on four identified key areas: (1) perception of student teachers about the three type of CA methods, (2) how far CAT assessment

method motivate self- learning practices (3) challenges faced by the student teachers to complete the three types of CA component and (4) Suggestions to improve the CAT component. There were four main items in the whole questionnaire, and the number of questions in each key area varied. Also, under some of the main items there were several sub items, which were included to get a broader understanding on the aspects related to the main items. Rating scales, structured type questions and few open-ended questions were among those sub items.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Student teachers' perceptions on CA methods

Majority of student teachers (98%) mentioned that they have received the relevant documents (Printed modules, Assignment book, instructions and guidelines, etc.) to complete the activities pertaining to CA component without any delay and they accepted that continuous assessment mechanism helped to motivate them to learn at distance mode as an adult learner. Most of the student teachers believed that CA component helped them to face final examination more confidently. Majority of the student teachers (89%) mentioned that CAT and take home assignments increased their motivation for self-study than activity based assignment. All the respondents expressed their views on how far these three CA methods increased their self-motivation as distance learners.

All the respondents expressed their level of consent with regard to the CAT based on following level of degrees:
(5) Strongly agree
(4) Agree
(3) Neither agree or disagree
(2) Disagree
(1) Strongly disagree.

Table 1: Students teachers' views on continuous assessment methods

CA methods	Student teachers views
Take home assignment	Motivate to refer modules and extra reading materials. Part II of the take home assignments increased our involvement to identify actual situations of the classroom and school settings. It motivated to explore new and updated information
Continuous Assessment Test	We thought…. compare to take home assignments we can easily prepare our self for CAT exam. But we realise…. writing answers for short and structured type questions…. we need to study carefully and clearly. Prior notice of relevant sessions helped me to prepare for the test.
Activity based assignment	Increased our presentation and leadership skills, promote collaborative learning; it helped to share our knowledge with others. It provided practical approach into the theory we learned and opportunities to apply theory into practice.

Table 2: Student Teachers Consent on CAT

Statements	5		4		3		2		1	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
The knowledge instructed through the PGDE programme is sufficient to face the CAT examination successfully.	78	24	224	69	23	07	-	-	-	-
Time Allocation for CAT examinations is sufficient	58	18	259	80	-	-	03	01	03	01
Clear instructions are given for completion of the CAT.	91	28	217	67	-	-	06	02	10	03
CATs provide sufficient opportunities to relate theory with practice.	65	20	211	65	06	02	19	06	23	07
It is more useful to inform the study sessions in advance which is going to be evaluated under the CAT.	275	85	49	15	-	-	-	-	-	-
The structure of the CAT papers is more helpful to construct and organize the answers.	55	17	217	67	06	02	19	06	32	10
Clear and simple language has been used in the CAT papers.	65	20	211	65	06	02	19	06	23	07
A supportive atmosphere was maintained by the supervisors at the CAT examination centers.	32	10	211	65	16	05	26	08	39	12
Sufficient infrastructure facilities are provided to carry out the CAT examinations.	42	13	185	57	19	06	32	10	32	10

CAT examinations are more useful than Take Home assignments.	233	72	58	18	-	-	23	07	10	03
As adult learner CAT examinations are helped to manage my available time than written assignments.	52	16	224	69	10	03	16	05	23	07
CAT examinations make me to learn in depth than written assignments.	36	11	181	56	19	6	49	15	39	12
Grades received for the CAT examinations are sufficient for my attempt.	81	25	175	54	-	-	29	09	39	12
The feedback given for me after the CAT examination are more useful.	16	5	68	21	23	07	123	38	94	29
CAT examinations are increasing our motivation for continuous learning.	55	17	191	59	10	3	32	10	36	11

As indicated in Table 2 the findings revealed that the highest number of the student teachers perceived the CAT method positively. The majority of the student teachers expressed that, CAT examinations are more useful (72%) than take home assignments. This may be because they feel that for the research based assignment they need to spend more time to observe the classroom settings. It is noted that most of the student teachers disagree (38%) or strongly disagree (29%) with the usefulness of the feedback given for the CAT.

Open ended questions in the questionnaire allowed the student teachers to mention the challenges faced by them in doing the CA component effectively.

Table 3: The Challenges Faced by the Student Teachers to Complete the CA Component

CA methods	Problems faced by the student teachers
Take home assignment	Difficulty of organising relevant answers, some sessions relevant to the assignment are not covered in the day schools. Difficulty of understanding particular problems in the assignment. We have to spend long time to complete assignment. Delay in receiving marked assignments. Personal barriers in writing and submitting assignments before the due dates.
Continuous Assessment Test	Not sufficient time allocated. Knowledge gained in the day school is not enough to face the test. Difficulty of organising short and structured answers. Delay and not receiving CAT marks and no enough feedback.
Activity Based Assignment	Not sufficient time allocated for group activities. Not receiving same opportunity for all to present. Some of the group members not contributed.

The following suggestions are mentioned by the student teachers for improving the CAT method.

- Grades for the CAT examinations should be informed before the next CAT.
- Enough time need to be allocated for CAT.
- Timely feedback should be given.
- It is good to give the answers of the CAT.
- It is preferred to return the marked CAT papers to the students.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that introducing the CAT into the CA component was very useful for the student teachers to upgrade their knowledge and to face the final examination more confidently as a learning tool. Even though the CAT was a new experience to the student teachers they were motivated to participate in the CAT. Student teachers showed their satisfaction about the overall organization of CAT.

The findings suggest that in order to increase the effectiveness of the CAT method the Faculty of Education need to consider the following recommendations;

1. Grade received by student teachers for the CAT examinations should be informed as early as possible.
2. Establish a proper mechanism to give feedback to the student teachers in relation to the CAT answer scripts
3. Improve the monitoring mechanism with regard to the CA component more efficiently and effectively.

Overall, the study revealed that the new mode of assessment introduced to the CA mechanism of the PGDE programme is positively perceived by the student teachers.

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