



DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY THE STUDENTS IN COMPLETING THE RESEARCH PROJECT IN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMMES

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INTRODUCTION

Incorporating a research project component along with a sound academic foundation in an undergraduate degree programmes enables students to develop independent critical thinking skills along with oral and written communication skills (Petrella & Jung,2008). A research project is a scientific endeavor to answer a research question and it is unique in that, it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal (Project Management institute, 2019). Faculty of Education of Open University of Sri Lanka conducts Bachelor of Education Degree programmes with the aim to provide skillful professionals from diverse areas into the teaching profession. At present the Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka conducts three Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programmes namely B.Ed Honours in Drama and Theatre, B.Ed Honours in Natural Sciences and B.Ed Honours in Special Needs Education which are four academic years Programmes. As a faculty, we believe the research experience is extremely valuable for our undergraduate students because it provides multiple benefits to them for their development as professional teachers and many benefits to the faculty also in different ways. According to Johnson & Button (2000) and Johnson (2012), one powerful form of professional development for teachers is the use of action research. Therefore, the Faculty of Education included a research project into these programmes as a compulsory course which comprise 8 credits where all students are supposed to conduct an action research project in the period of teaching practice.

Ability to conduct an action research is critically important for teachers to improve educational practices in their classrooms as reflective practitioners. Johnson (2012) also affirmed that action research bridges the gap between theory and practice. Thus, teachers' capabilities to become a researcher-practitioner come into play, making them fully aware of how they decide to make their class more interactive, more learner-oriented, more productive, and more meaningful to the lives of their students. Further the capabilities of action research bring in an increased sense of professionalism in education (Hine, 2013; Hine & Lavery, 2014; Tomlinson, 1995). Moreover, conducting small scale research study and reporting it in a scholarly manner would provide the foundation for students to pursue their higher studies in the field of education in future. Therefore, strengthening the current research project component of the Bachelor of Education Degree Programmes is critically important.

However these undergraduate students of B.Ed programmes are studying in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment. Therefore, they have to face many difficulties which is imposed by the instructor's absence, the different support systems in distance education, as well as the feeling of isolation, which is possibly experienced by open and distance learners (Gunawardana & Mclsaac,2004). As an institute which conduct its programmes through open and distance (ODL) mode, it is very important to explore the difficulties that are faced by undergraduates when they are completing research projects and to identify numerous ways that can be implemented within ODL environment to support students continuously. Considering all the facts mentioned above, a research of this nature is very important.

Objectives of the study

1. To identify the problems faced by students in completion of the research project
2. To make suggestions to address the problems faced by students in completion of the



research project

METHODOLOGY

The survey design was employed in this study. The sample of the study was all the B.Ed students (no. 100) of B.Ed Honours in Natural Sciences, B.Ed Honours in Drama and Theatre and B.Ed Honours in Special Needs Education programmes who qualified to award in 2019 convocation and two (02) Programme coordinators of B.Ed Degree programmes. The research tools of the study include an online survey questionnaire for students and interviews for programme coordinators. Data were analyzed statistically and descriptively. The sample of the study consisted of only B.Ed undergraduate students who qualified to award in 2019 convocation of three B.Ed programmes and it's a limitation of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Problems faced by students in completion of the research project

It was revealed that although the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education and the Department of Special Needs of the Faculty of Education adopt some common practices such as assigning supervisors, having communication through email- WhatsApp, Viber, maintaining contact sessions, providing project manuals to facilitate the students, still they face many problems as follows.

Table:1

Problems faced by students in completion of the research project

Problem	No.	Percentage
Difficulties in identifying the research problem	33	45.8%
Difficulties in finding relevant literature in the mother language	30	41.6%
Difficulties in academic writing	37	51.4%
Limited amount of library facilities in the regional and study centers	31	43%
Problems related to meet the supervisors	61	84.7%
Difficulties in managing work due to family and work-related commitments	62	86.1%
Problems with time management	34	47.2%
Difficulties faced due to geographical distance	35	48.6%
Less support from the school community and lack of resources	48	66.6%

Note: Total number of students responded = 72

Above mentioned problems are the common problems encountered by the students specifically, in identification of the research problem, planning the research project and in implementing the research project.

Analysis of data collected through the interviews with programme coordinators also evident the above condition. According to them students do not do the authentic learning during the action research project, students do not do the adequate referencing, have poor interactions with supervisors and they do not have adequate research knowledge. Further lack of punctuality of the students is another main problem that identified in completing an action research project.



Suggestions to address the problems faced by students in completion of the research project

After analysed the data of student's online survey questionnaire and the data of the interviews with programme coordinators, it was suggested to facilitate the students through Zoom; Learner management system (LMS) and other modes which are suitable to ODL environment; enhance library facilities (more books on action research in the Sinhala and Tamil mediums); provide more practice in academic writing; provide supervisor-student meeting schedules at the beginning of the research to facilitate the completion of the research projects and to develop faculty level guidelines for action research project component of B.Ed programmes.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

These undergraduate students of B.Ed programmes are studying in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment. Therefore, they have to face many problems which is possibly experienced by open and distance learners. Therefore, by identifying the problems encountered by the students, academics can adopt a proper mechanism to scaffold and provide more guidance to students to complete their research projects in an effective manner.

Further it was recommended to conduct an action research as the second phase of this study to explore the ways to improve the quality of the practices and quality of the research project component through open and distance mode.

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