

## **Examine the challenges encountered by undergraduates pursuing external degrees offered by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura regarding the conduct of lectures at the university**

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### **Abstract**

Students who register for the distance learning degrees (External degrees) offered by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura are in different age categories. Most have been employed (Kuruppuarachchi, and Karunanayake, 2017). Also, they live and work in other areas of the country. Some of them have been married and have babies. Therefore, External students cannot regularly attend the lectures, participate in the field work, or frequently visit the university to take and hand in the assignments. Existing literature suggests applying a distance or blended mode to deliver the external degrees of the government universities of Sri Lanka. Using a survey research methodology, this study was done to understand the problems faced by undergraduates of external degrees offered by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Research revealed that using E-Learning techniques to deliver external degrees is at a minimum level. As a result, students face many difficulties participating in the onsite lectures and completing their degrees on time.

**Keywords:** *External Degrees, Distance Learning, E-Learning, LMS*

### **1. Introduction**

In Sri Lanka, even though many students qualify for university entrance, only around 1/5 of this number enter the government Universities. The main reason for this situation is that government Universities do not have enough resources to cater to all the students who qualify for university entrance. Some Sri Lankan government Universities offer distance learning degrees (external degrees) to cater to some of the students who qualify for university entrance but cannot enter a university and are willing to study for a degree. For most of these degrees, there is no age limit to enter; even working people can register. Therefore, working people who require a university degree for their promotions can complete these degrees while working. In addition, the total cost of a degree for a student is much less than that of similar degrees offered by private Universities in Sri Lanka and foreign Universities. Therefore, these distance learning degrees provide an opportunity for students who cannot afford the cost of the degrees offered by private Universities to complete a degree at a reasonable price.

For these reasons, distance learning degrees offered by the government Universities play a vital role in higher education by filling the gap between education needs and education opportunities. University of Sri Jayewardenepura offer six external degrees: Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Science in Business Studies, Bachelor of Science in Management (Public), Bachelor of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bachelor of Arts in English, Bachelor of Environment and Development Studies.

In these degrees, the university conducts 40 hours of lectures for each course unit offered in the degrees, and students are required to come to the University to participate in the lectures.

In delivering the distance learning Degrees, the University and students face several practical problems:

1. Students living or working in remote areas cannot participate in the seminars conducted by the University.
2. The university cannot offer enough hours of seminars/ lectures to cover the entire curriculum, because of insufficient physical and human resources.
3. Providing continuous assignments, field work, discussions, and practical work that improve the skills of the students is very difficult
4. Because most of the students have been employed or involved in some other activities while studying, they cannot allocate their daytime on all days for their studies.
5. Institutions that offer tuition for these degrees are business-oriented and do not provide quality education, and do not offer tuition for the course units that have less demand.

As a result, pass rates of these degrees are very low compared to the pass rates of internal degrees. Also, many students leave the degree at different stages of the degree, or sometimes it takes more years to complete the degree. Most of these problems are because the University is trying to apply the same delivery methods used for internal degrees to the distance learning degrees.

To solve these problems, the UGC and the University have implemented several measures. UGC tried to restructure how external degree programs are offered with the UGC circular 932. In addition, the EDP grant of the HETC project provided grants to buy textbooks to be used by external students, develop course manuals for the course units offered in external degrees, install Learning Management Systems for external degrees, etc. A considerable improvement has not been realized even with these measures.

Students who register for the distance learning degrees (External degrees) offered by the University are in different age categories, and most have been employed. Also, they live and work in different areas of the country. Some of them have been married and have babies. Consequently, several issues and challenges have arisen because the University uses the same delivery methods for internal students. External students cannot regularly attend lectures, cannot participate in field work, and cannot frequently visit the university to take and hand in the assignments. As a result, there are three significant problems:

- Student dropout rates are very high
- A longer time is taken to complete a degree
- The pass rate of external students is very low

Even though the University has implemented several measures, such as adhering to UGC circular 932, those measures have not fully succeeded and have not solved all these problems.

### Objectives of the Study

1. Understand the problems faced by the undergraduates of external degrees offered by the University due to using the traditional delivery method.
2. Determine the E-Learning techniques and traditional methods preferred by the students.
3. Suggest applying E-Learning to improve the quality of distance learning degrees.

## 2. Review of Literature

Wikipedia defines external degrees as “An external degree offered by a university to students who have not been required to be physically present within the geographic territory of the institution. These undergraduates may be called external students and may study independently or by distance learning at classes unconnected with the university. They may obtain the degree by passing examinations once they have reached the required standard, or by having completed a programme put together from various courses or modules”

This definition defines students who read for external degrees as those who are not required to physically present at the University. In addition, it says these students’ study in classes not connected with a university, or independently, or by distance learning.

In a speech delivered by Prof. Wiswa Warnapala, Minister of Higher Education at the Academic Seminar on External Degrees organised by the UGC on September 19, 2008, at the Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute, Prof. Warnapala stated that:

“I propose to make a couple of criticisms of the external degree programmes which, in the last two decades, have become mills, churning out graduates who are neither competent nor employable. Today, these graduates have become pawns in the hands of a political party whose one instrument of political mobilisation is the unemployed graduates; they have formed themselves into a union whose membership is easily mobilised and articulated because they are impelled by the desire to get employment. They, as many an administrator say, cannot fit into a position as they do not have the capacity and ability; in other words, these graduates, who have come via the external degree mill, are half-baked and incompetent men who do not display any intellectual ability”

Minister sees external degree programs as “mills” that produce unskilled and unemployable graduates.

In addition, the minister said: “All universities, without a proper plan, have organised external degree programmes to extract financial benefits. The major incentive has been the income generation through external degree programmes; still, the fees are

inadequate to provide quality education. However, another fact is that the income earned from external examinations is not properly used to provide high-quality service to the external student clientele. The system has been built in such a way as to produce poor quality graduates who are coming out of the mill without academic competence and intellectual ability. The whole scheme has been organised solely to provide the student with a certificate which he proposes to market for a job”

Minister emphasises that Universities conduct external degrees without a proper plan and solely to earn money.

In his speech, the minister suggested rethinking and improving the quality of external degree programs offered by the government Universities.

(Aluwihare and De Silva, 2016) Have done a study to understand the reasons for taking more years to complete an engineering degree offered by Open University of Sri Lanka and pointed out that institutional barriers such as poor academic counselling and guidance; laboratory sessions being inappropriate/not sufficient to understand the course material; inadequate facilities, such as library resources, and lack of laboratory facilities at the regional centres and Personal factors such as work-related challenges, travelling time and cost of commuting to the main centre located in Colombo and inability to spend the required time expected of the programme have played significant roles in the prolonged completion. Also, Psychological barriers such as possessing a limited repertoire of study strategies, a lack of understanding of open and distance learning (ODL) methods and a deficiency of continuous motivation had a tremendous impact on the delayed graduation.

As Barefoot (2004) pointed out, Student dropout rates in distance degrees are typically higher than in face-to-face conventional degrees.

(Fozdar et al., 2006) Several significant issues faced by students doing external degrees: The lack of time (due to employment, family commitments), distance to study centres, absence of interaction with students, insufficient academic support, expectations of the program not being met and financial constraints.

(Berge et al., 2002) categorized challenges faced by distance learners as situational-, epistemological-, philosophical-, psychological-, pedagogical-, technical-, social- and cultural-related challenges.

Distance learning degrees differ from internal degrees in various aspects. In online learning, teacher-student activities are relatively separate in time and space (Yanhui et al., 2015)

(James Fleck, 2012) “There is no doubt that blended learning will become more prevalent. Even conventional face-to-face campus-based teaching operations will use online activities as important supporting elements, and information and resources available over the web will take over from printed library resources”.

(Shironica, 2008) says, "Online course delivery is rapidly growing among educational institutions worldwide, especially in Open and Distance Learning institutions. The frequent criticisms of distance education for having limited interactions between teachers and students as opposed to traditional face-to-face teaching can be significantly

minimised with the increased use of online methods, due to their unique instructional capabilities. Online learning provides ample opportunities for students learning at a distance to constantly interact with their teachers and peers, sharing experiences and working collaboratively. Creating a sense of social presence is essential to establishing a collaborative online learning environment, as it is the most important factor that helps people actively collaborate, thus increasing a sense of belonging to the learning community". In her study, she describes how online learning can overcome many problems associated with traditional degree delivery methods.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The population is all the students registered for external degrees offered by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

#### *Sample and Sampling Method*

The six external degrees offered by the university are in different fields. Those fields are Arts (Humanities and Social Sciences), Management and Commerce.

As the student sample, 377 students were selected so that the sample represents students from each field. The number of students from a particular field was determined by the number of students enrolled on that field in 2016. The following formula determined the number of students selected from a specific field.

$$\text{Number of students selected} = \frac{\text{Number of students enrolled for the field}}{\text{Total number of students enrolled in all the fields}} \times 1000$$

After deciding the number of students from a particular field, that number was divided among the degree programs. Students from a specific degree were selected randomly.

#### *Data Collection*

Data was collected by questionnaires given to each student in the sample. The questionnaire had two parts. The first part was used to determine the current position of E-Learning in external degrees. In this part of the Questionnaire, five-point Likert scale questions were used to understand the level of usage of e-learning techniques in the course units that the student's study in their degree programs. The second part of the questionnaire aimed to test students' preferences for using each e-learning and traditional technique.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### *Demographical Factors of Students*

According to the year of study of the responding undergraduates, the average (Median) year of study of the students is 2016 out of the total personnel of 377. The minimum year of study of the respondents' undergraduates is 2014, and the maximum year of study of the respondents' undergraduates is 2018, where the dispersion (Interquartile Range) of the particular year of study group is 2. The skewness of the distribution of year of study is -0.3488, which is slightly negatively skewed. The Kurtosis of the above particular group is -1.2849, which indicates that it is moderately negatively distributed.

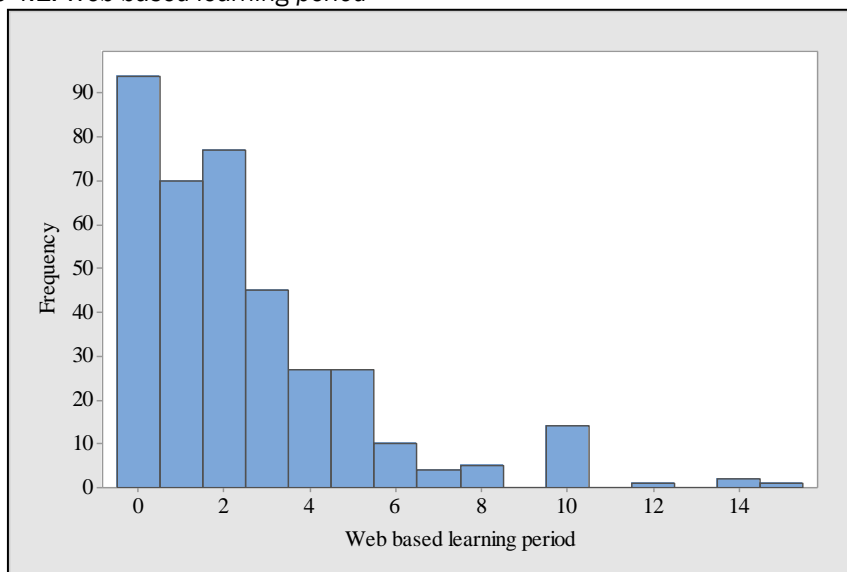
According to the result, only 25% of the students lived in the Colombo district. Around 49% of the students lived in the western province.

According to the age distribution of the responding undergraduates and the summary measures, the average age of students is 25. The minimum age of undergraduates is 21, and the maximum is 55. The dispersion (Quartile deviation) of age is 4. Age distribution of undergraduates is moderately positively skewed, indicating a value of 2.5184. When considering the kurtosis of the data set, it has a relatively positive kurtosis (leptokurtic), which means a value of 7.2758.

Around 75% of the students are doing jobs. Only 44% of the students are working in the Western Province. All other students are working in different areas. 7.4% of students are working in Kurunagala, 3.2% of students are working in Rathnapura, 2.9% of students are working in Mathara. While 81.7% of the students have their own computers, 96.3% have their own smartphones. 90.98% of the students access the Internet using their smartphones.

#### LMS Usage in Degree Programs:

Figure 4.1: Web-based learning period



Median	2.0
Inter Quartile Range	2.75
Skewness	1.7836
Kurtosis	3.8320
Minimum	0
Maximum	15.0

Source: Author's calculations

As shown by the Histogram (Figure 4.1) and summary measures particular to the web-based learning period, the average (median) web-based learning period of the undergraduates under 377 personnel is 2 years. In contrast, the maximum web-based learning period of undergraduates is 15 years, and the minimum is 0 years. Since the

skewness is 1.7836, the distribution of the web-based learning period of undergraduates is slightly positively skewed, where dispersion is 2.75 within the range of 15 years. The Kurtosis for the distribution is 3.832, which indicates that it is moderately positively distributed.

*Table 4.1: Level of LMS usage*

Statement	None	Very Few Subjects	Some Subjects	Many Subjects	All Subjects
The LMS has made the subjects more accessible	17.0	22.5	34.7	13.3	12.5
Upload notes in Text or PowerPoint formats	26.8	29.2	23.9	12.2	8.0
Upload recorded lectures (Audio Materials)	69.5	14.6	11.7	13.2	1.1
Upload recorded lectures (Video Materials)	79.6	10.1	6.9	2.7	0.8
Upload e-books	69.8	17.8	6.9	4.5	1.1
Upload links to learning websites	48.3	21.2	17.2	6.6	6.6
Upload past Papers	15.1	11.1	17.2	17.5	39
Online assignments are given	75.3	11.4	7.4	4.2	1.6
Self-practice online quizzes are given	75.9	12.5	6.9	3.2	1.6
Examinations are done online	87.3	5.0	4.8	1.6	1.3
Required notices are given through LMS	39.8	14.6	15.4	9.0	21.2
Online discussion forums are given	66.6	12.2	9.8	5.8	5.6
Chat rooms are given in the LMS	54.6	12.7	11.7	8.0	13
Students' feedback is taken through the LMS	49.6	13.8	15.4	10.6	10.6
Student portfolios are maintained in LMS	57.0	13.8	8.8	5.3	15.1
In general, the University has supported the use of LMS	23.6	18.8	16.7	15.1	25.7
The LMS has made the subjects more accessible	17	22.5	34.7	13.3	12.5
Upload notes in Text or PowerPoint formats	26.8	29.2	23.9	12.2	8
Upload recorded lectures (Audio Materials)	69.5	14.6	11.7	13.2	1.1

Upload recorded lectures (Video Materials)	79.6	10.1	6.9	2.7	0.8
Upload e-books	69.8	17.8	6.9	4.5	1.1

Source: Author's calculations

Figure 4.19 displays the LMS usage in the degree program at the university. According to the above summary measures and the histogram, the average (Median) LMS usage in the degree program at the university is 28.846 out of a total of 377 personnel. The minimum LMS usage in a degree program at a university is 0, and the maximum LMS usage in a degree program at a university is 100, where the dispersion (Interquartile Range) of the particular distribution is 26.92. The skewness of the distribution of LMS usage in a degree program is 0.7621, which is slightly positively skewed. The Kurtosis for the distribution is 0.2062, which indicates that it is moderately positively distributed.

Table 4.2: Faculty wise LMS usage

	Arts	Management
Median	23.077	34.615
Inter Quartile Range	25	28.846
Skewness	1.0628	0.5340
Kurtosis	0.9914	-0.0965
Minimum	0	0
Maximum	100	92.308

Source: Author's calculations

As shown by the above summary measures, the average LMS usage in degree programs for the Arts and Management faculty in the university is 23.077 and 34.615, respectively. The minimum LMS usage in the degree program of the Arts and Management faculty is 0; the maximum LMS usage in the Arts faculty is 100, and the Management faculty is 92.308, respectively. The dispersion (Quartile deviation) of Arts faculty LMS usage in a degree program is 25, while the Management faculty LMS usage in a degree program is 28.846. The distribution for the LMS usage in a degree program of the Arts faculty is moderately positively skewed (1.06282). In contrast, the LMS usage in the degree program in the Management faculty is slightly positively skewed (0.5340). When considering the kurtosis of the two data sets, the Arts faculty has a relatively positive kurtosis (leptokurtic) of 0.9914. In contrast, the Management group has a relatively negative kurtosis, with a value of -0.0965.

Table 4.3: Residential District and Preference on using LMS

Residential District	Median	Interquartile Range	Skewness	Kurtosis	Minimum	Maximum
Ampara	55.5	40.18	0.13	-2.78	35.71	80.36
Anuradhapura	83.9	42.00	-1.59	1.86	0	92.90
Badulla	75	22.32	0.16	-0.50	50	100
Colombo	62.5	28.57	-0.45	0.18	0	100
Galle	55.36	21.43	-0.70	3.47	0	100
Gampaha	64.29	29.46	0.02	-0.78	23.21	100
Hambantota	50	25	0.16	-0.50	50	52
Kalutara	58.93	27.68	-0.33	0.16	7.14	100



Kandy	72.32	25.89	-0.36	-0.62	39.29	92.86
Kegalle	50.89	35.71	-0.31	0.10	0	92.86
Kurunegala	73.21	25.00	-0.31	-0.34	25	100
Matale	66.96	39.73	0.03	-0.83	33.93	100
Matara	57.14	27.23	0.79	-0.82	46.43	96.43
Moneragala	58	51.30	-0.73	-0.63	0	87.50
Nuwara Eliya	80.36	10.71	0.94	-0.34	76.79	87.50
Polonnaruwa	82.14	27.68	0.25	-2.51	67.86	100
Puttalama	58.93	18.75	-0.62	-2.30	44.64	66.07
Ratnapura	60.71	39.29	-0.43	-0.18	8.93	100
Trincomalee	75	25.73	0.16	0.18	75	75

*Source: Author's calculations*

## 5. Conclusions

The objectives of this study were to determine the current position of E-Learning in distance learning degrees in Sri Lanka, to determine the E-Learning techniques and traditional methods preferred by the students and to make suggestions on the application of E-Learning in improving the quality of distance learning degrees in the higher educational institutions and UGC for policy making. Therefore, a questionnaire was used to collect data from students and lecturers regarding using LMS in external degrees and students' preferences on using LMS in external degrees.

As the demographic factors of the students reveal students have been spread around the country (15.65% from Kurunagala, 5.04% from Rathnapura), there are so many students whose age is higher than 25 years (around 50%), married, 74% of the students population is females, 74% of the students population is doing jobs, many students are working in districts other than Colombo (Percentage of working in Colombo district is only 32.6), some students are involving in other studies other than these degrees: 34%. Therefore, it is understandable that most students find it difficult to regularly participate in the seminars or lectures conducted at the university and in the suburbs. This reveals the importance of introducing E-learning techniques in delivering these degrees.

Most students have their computers (81.7) and Smartphones (96.3). Most of them use the Internet (99.2) using their computers or Smartphones. E-learning techniques are used to deliver external degrees at a minimum level. Even though this study showed 86% as the LMS usage level, it is only for publishing notices and giving past papers. Delivering lectures through LMS is at a minimum level: less than 20%.

While 32.9% of the students want to participate in the lectures conducted at the university, 53.9% wish to upload lecture notes in LMS rather than conduct lectures there. 86.8% of the students prefer to download past papers from the LMS. Only 7.6% of the students like to collect past papers from the University. While 19.6% of the students prefer to collect and hand over the assignments by coming to the University, 68.5% prefer to collect and hand over the assignments through LMS.

While 29.9% of the students prefer to discuss problems related to subject matters in tutorial classes, 49.6% of the students prefer to discuss issues related to subject matters in online discussion forums. 82% of the students choose to receive notices through LMS. Only 4.5% of the students said they have no required knowledge to use LMS. Finally, when it asked the students to select between traditional and online teaching methods, 57.9% of them selected them. In comparison, 19.6% of the students chose conventional teaching methods.

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