



NARCHE2021

DISCOVER AND DISSEMINATE:
BEST PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

National Action Research Conference on Higher Education - 2021

DISCOVER AND DISSEMINATE : BEST PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

GOOD PRACTICES IN THE TEACHING LEARNING PROCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Sri Jayawardenepura, Sri Lanka



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University of Sri Jayewardenepura

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Preface

This book is intended to compile a collection of academic articles written by the members of the panel discussion on “Good Practices in the Teaching-Learning Process in Higher Education”, which was held in parallel to the first National Action Research Conference on Higher Education (NARCHE) 2021 organized by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS), University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. As the Dean of the Faculty puts it right in the conference proceedings “Effective teaching is a continual learning process that requires endless accommodations, innovations, and problem-solving. It is seldom when one “right answer” works in all situations or provides a fully realized solution. This is where research becomes important. Research examining the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment methods plays a vital role in the modern fast-changing technology-based education today.” It is in this context where things are not running as expected, action research becomes important to reflect upon our own practices and find more effective strategies.

The theme of the first NARCHE was ‘Discover and Disseminate: Best Practices in Higher Education.’ At a time when the world is confronted with new challenges in teaching, learning, and assessment due to Covid 19 pandemic, this year’s conference theme is apt and timely. It is necessary to discover equally effective alternatives and protocols for distance learning, online or otherwise, and share such best practices with the academic community in higher education. Teachers, students, parents, and all stakeholders are expected to respond proactively to the needs of the time by transforming changes and challenges into opportunities that will provide quality education during this uncertain period.

The panel discussion on “Good Practices in the Teaching-Learning Process in Higher Education” was a novel idea that made the conference more interactive and enlightening. Six experts namely Prof. Shirantha Heenkenda, Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Prof. Prasad Sethunga, Department of Education, University of Peradeniya, Prof. Rohana Basil Marasinghe, former Director, Staff Development Centre, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Dr. Ayomi Irugalbandara, Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education, Faculty of Education, Open University of Sri Lanka, Dr. Namali Suraweera, Department of Library and Information Science, University of Kelaniya and Dr. Bimali Indrarathna of the Department of Education, University of York participated in the panel discussion representing national and international universities, and this book compiles the views they shared during the panel discussion under six chapters. While retaining the individual identity of each panelist, they look at some aspects of higher education from different perspectives on the basis

of their expertise. For instance, Prof. Marasinghe shares his views regarding the critical role of Staff Development and the place of Action Research (AR) in Staff Development, paying particular attention to the changes and challenges. On the other hand, Dr Ayomi Irugalbandara shares her views regarding the best practices used to teach practical subjects such as Drama and Theatre in higher education institutes in Sri Lanka. Dr. Namali Suraweera looks at timely issues and critically questions the preparedness of Sri Lankan academics and students to engage in online education during the Covid 19 pandemic. She proposes suggestions to make online teaching and learning more effective and interactive with the help of online tools. Dr. Bimali Indrarathna brings the discussion to an interesting juncture and highlights some good practices and insights from international contexts. Finally, Prof. Shirantha Heenkenda shares his views regarding the practical challenges confronted by higher education administrators in state universities in Sri Lanka. Thus, the writers share their practical experiences and good practices in higher education, and the challenges encountered in implementing such good practices in Sri Lankan state universities.

The last chapter summarizes the findings of eight research papers presented during the technical sessions of the NARCHE 2021 along with the names and affiliations of the authors.

This book has been a team effort with five authors contributing their expertise. Given the workload of the academics during this pandemic period, it is not an easy task to write a research paper, and we thank them for their efforts while extending our special thanks to Prof. Shirantha Heenkenda, the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura for encouraging and supporting to print this book.

Dr. Sampath Pushpakumara

Mr. Sarath Ananda

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Staff Development (SD) and Action Research (AR): Changes and Challenges

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Introduction:

Universities are being recognized as nation-building institutes. As such, human resource development is one of the primary functions of all universities in Sri Lanka. This article starts by briefing the activities conducted at the Staff Development Centre (SDC) of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura depicting into underline principles and practices adopted in planning and conducting SDC programs. Identification of the challenges and limitations faced in educational research is discussed. Finally, the place of Action Research in Staff Development is justified.

Why is Action Research (AR) important in Staff Development (SD)?

Traditional staff development of Sri Lankan universities is based on compartmented development of its staff making them fit for the purpose. However, with the changing milieu, evidence-based practice is a recognized practice in modern education. With the rapid expansion of present Learning/Teaching (L/T) activities, greatly supported with modern technologies, a large number of data is being generated. However, to take timely and appropriate actions, such data should be processed appropriately to generate information that should be readily available for the decision-makers. Validity and local relevance are

crucially important factors in such information. Action Research (AR) is a recognized method adopted to improve practices by conducting a unique inquiry into the practice itself, minimizing the action delay.

SDC activities

With the introduction of competitive funding and the Circular on Staff Development (No: 937), the University Grant Commission (UGC) enables universities to recruit suitable staff into their SDCs. The University of Sri Jayewardenepura (SJP) embraced such practices and organized its programmes for all categories of staff (i.e. Academic, Non-academic and Executive staff). SDC programmes are classified into main four areas namely, (a) regular programmes (e.g. CTHE, Induction Training for non-academics staff), (b) On-demand programmes (e.g. Library, Maintenance division), (c) Continuing Professional Development programmes (e.g. Programmes on Quality Assurance, Assessments, Student-centered learning, Outcome-Based Education) and (4) Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes such as J'pura University Toastmasters Club. Such activities are conducted in different locations (e.g., In-class, computer labs, hotels and outbound training centers).

Underline principles and practices of SDC activities

All the activities are based on relevant educational/developmental theories and principles. Out of them, learner-centered approach is one important educational approach used with success. Reflective practice was another important concept used in almost all the programs. The assessments, such as the portfolio assessment of CTHE, is extensively based on reflective practices. Challenges faced by the SDC today. With the impact of COVID -19 on staff development, the distance delivery

of educational programs seems to be the only viable solution, which is largely facilitated with the information technology revolution. Providing proper training to use such technologies has drastically become a challenge for today's educational practices.

Limitations of educational research in SD

Conducting traditional research is a challenge in education due to many issues. Case studies, retrospective analysis, documentary analysis, were certain possibilities but were not effective on its own. Moreover, experimental studies are not frequently used in education; applicability and ethical issues are prominent concerns of traditional research methods. The relatively short duration of the programmes does not provide sufficient time to research at Kirkpatrick higher levels.

The place of Action Research in SD

In this context, action research has become a feasible alternative. Action Research is an interactive method of collecting information and a well-established method of research practised in educational settings. Unlike traditional research, in which the objective is to develop theories and discover generalized principles to apply later into other educational settings, action research aims at improving practices by conducting a unique inquiry into the practice itself. Therefore, it minimizes the action delay. As the data is generated onsite and recorded with the context, it is highly relevant to the local setting. Therefore, Action Research is a promising alternative in Staff Development Research.

Good Practices in Bachelor of Education Honours in Drama and Theatre

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Introduction

Successfully achieving meaningful change in education is seldom a simple feat. Given the variables, stakeholders, and implications that educators face, it can be difficult to know where to begin and how to map an adaptable path forward. By starting with an understanding of the type of change that is sought, change leaders create a blueprint for what will be required to catalyze action. By thoughtfully crafting a plan that matches strategies with signals of local context, culture, and conditions, these changes can enable effective, lasting transformation.

There is currently an increasing demand for highly qualified and effective teachers to achieve improvements in student performance. Similarly, there is an increasing recognition of the fact that individual teachers impact significantly on student achievement (No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act). The UNESCO Institute of Statistics has estimated that about 69 million teachers need to be recruited by 2030 to achieve universal primary and secondary educational goals (Lekamge et al., 2018). Against this global backdrop of approaching demand, the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education in the Faculty of Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka is paying careful attention to new approaches and pedagogical strategies in the context of their Bachelor of Education Honours

in Drama and Theatre Degree Program. The main objective of this Degree program is to develop the competencies needed by effective Drama and Theatre graduates; the knowledge, practice, and methodological competence required to obtain appropriate professional status/qualifications, and to have the capacity to engage in research/practice-based postgraduate studies. The program is designed, therefore, to consolidate and strengthen students' knowledge in Drama and Theatre education and to develop research capacity and professional skills in the discipline. The program has been implemented successfully, incorporating new ways of teaching, and in 2018 it received an 'A' grade evaluation from the Quality Survey Task Committee from the national University Grants Commission. The following account of approaches that have been implemented to enhance pre-service teacher capacity-building can be identified as key elements of its success.

Teaching Practice

The teaching practice component of the program aims to develop the kinds of 21st-century skills and abilities that the student teachers will need to support effective learning in their future classrooms (Students Handbook, 2021). The experience of teaching practice has been well researched internationally. In fact, attention of the recent studies has been drawn to (a) professional growth; (b) the alignment of teaching practice and course content (practice/theory); (Liu, 2012); and (c) other related issues such as time and classroom management (Saphier et al., 2008). Teaching practice is an essential component of initial teacher education degree programs in Sri Lanka and around the world. The practical component of pre-service education is provided in the shape of experiences in real classroom contexts.

The program which is the focus of this discussion includes a six-month teaching practice component

in a government school, requiring a minimum of 120 planned teaching sessions during Teaching Practice Stage 1. Before starting out on their 24-week full-time practical experience, the student teachers participate in 10 professional skills development workshops. These workshops are designed to provide opportunities for experimentation and to stimulate positive expectations for these pre-service teachers. The student teachers are provided with a context and an opportunity for experimenting with the art of teaching, for 'acting' teacher. After these professional skills development workshops, five orientation workshops are conducted, and they are designed to prepare students for 'real' classroom experience before they embark on teaching in real classroom.

Observations of the real classroom teaching – the teaching practice itself shows that student teachers often experience difficulties in matters such as classroom discipline, alignment of assessments, using equipment for learning, and problems in relation to translating their theory knowledge to practice (Saritaş, 2007; Yahya et al., 2017). Therefore, a mentor is appointed from each school for each student-teacher to support the development of their teaching and professional orientation and their professional commitment (Darling-Hammond, 2014). The mentor is a key component of this preparatory process (Goos and Moni, 2001). They help the student teachers to adapt to school culture, to communicate effectively with different study groups, to participate voluntarily in school activities, and various other elements of the teacher role. Methods used for assessing student teachers during teaching practice are of fundamental concern, with classroom observation being used as an evaluation approach (Brandt et al, 2007). After successful completion of all requirements of their Stage I teaching practice, the student teachers are then eligible to undertake the Stage II final evaluation. Traditionally, teaching practice stage II involves the evaluation of two lessons, and

the final evaluation conducted by the university lecturer considers the following components: planning the lesson; implementation of the lesson; assessment and feedback; management of the lesson; and the use of teaching-learning aids.

Action research

Using Action Research with pre-service teachers has become a key component of many teacher education programmes around the world (Kizilaslan and Leutwyler, 2012). All student teachers complete an action research component during their six months teaching practice period. The main objective of this element is to provide the opportunity to make meaningful, reflective use of new knowledge, attitudes, and skills which have been acquired through participation in the program; and to raise awareness of problems facing the school system and to build confidence needed to find successful solutions to those problems. The student teachers are required to conduct a full action research process, including obtaining ethical approval from their school authority. Their focus is on inquiry skills, rather than more generic research skills (such as the use of statistics, interviews, observations). Each student teacher is guided throughout this process by a supervisor appointed by the university.

Reflective Practice

The key elements of the Action Research process lie in the relationship between theory and practice with the emphasis on reflection. The student teachers write a reflective journal during their action research project, with the final version of the journal being attached to the Action Research report and submitted to the University for Final Evaluation. Reflection is key. Action Research involves, planning (theory), teaching (practice), reflecting (re-visiting theory to inform further practice); this is the reflective practice cycle, now recognised as key to good practice. Back in 1938

Dewey described it as the ability “to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with future experiences” (Dewey, 1938, p.110). Based on this understanding, a significant body of research evidence has been developed supporting the argument that reflective practice is key to effective practice: pre-service teacher education around the world includes ‘Action Research’, recognizing it an important means of integrating content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and praxis (Kim, 2018). It is included in the International Alliance of Leading Education Institutes IALEI (2008) report as a core element of pre-service teacher education.

Feedback

Effective feedback is an essential part of effective learning. It is required to help student teachers to understand not only the content that is being studied but also their level of understanding and ability to apply the learning. It provides guidance on how to improve their understanding and their practice. Gürkan (2018) argued that academic feedback is more strongly and more consistently related to achievement than any other teaching behaviour. Feedback is particularly important for students studying in distance learning mode; and assignment writing is essential for gaining eligibility for the final exam. Based on the course credit, student teachers have different sets of assignments to complete, and all are evaluated by an academic staff member who provides comprehensive feedback. The feedback always includes explanation of how a final grade is assigned and how feedback can be provided as early as possible in the process to guide students and direct students in the right direction for successful completion.

In summary, looking back over recent time it is clear that a powerful new sense of change is being generated in this undergraduate degree program; a form of change in approach that aligns with the

21st-century context. New approaches to Drama and Theatre Education in the university sector are responding to the challenges and excitements of a rapidly-changing environment (Irugalbandara, 2021). Redesigning programmes and including reflection as a core element of professional preparation reflects this change.

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Best Practices for Teaching Online in Higher Education

Keywords: *Digital Teaching and Learning Tools, Students, Online Learning Activities, Best practices, Sri Lanka, Universities*

Introduction

Due to the COVID – 19 pandemic, the Sri Lankan education system has rapidly transformed their conventional education to online education, and this transformation was unplanned. All universities, campuses, and higher education Institutes tried their best to promote online education to ensure uninterrupted university education during this prevailing situation. Therefore, Sri Lanka made a remarkable transition to online tertiary education after closing its higher education institutions in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (Hayashi et al., 2020). This study further found that nearly 90% of student respondents have been able to access online education. This rate is similar to developed countries like Japan (Hayashi et al., 2020). However, due to lack of preparation as well as lack of training on digital teaching and learning in the Sri Lankan higher education sector, there is an urgent requirement to revisit curriculums, pedagogy, and assessments for online education and blended learning.

To help academics and professionals on their journey in developing expertise in online teaching as well as to engage with students and to provide effective online learning environment, this paper

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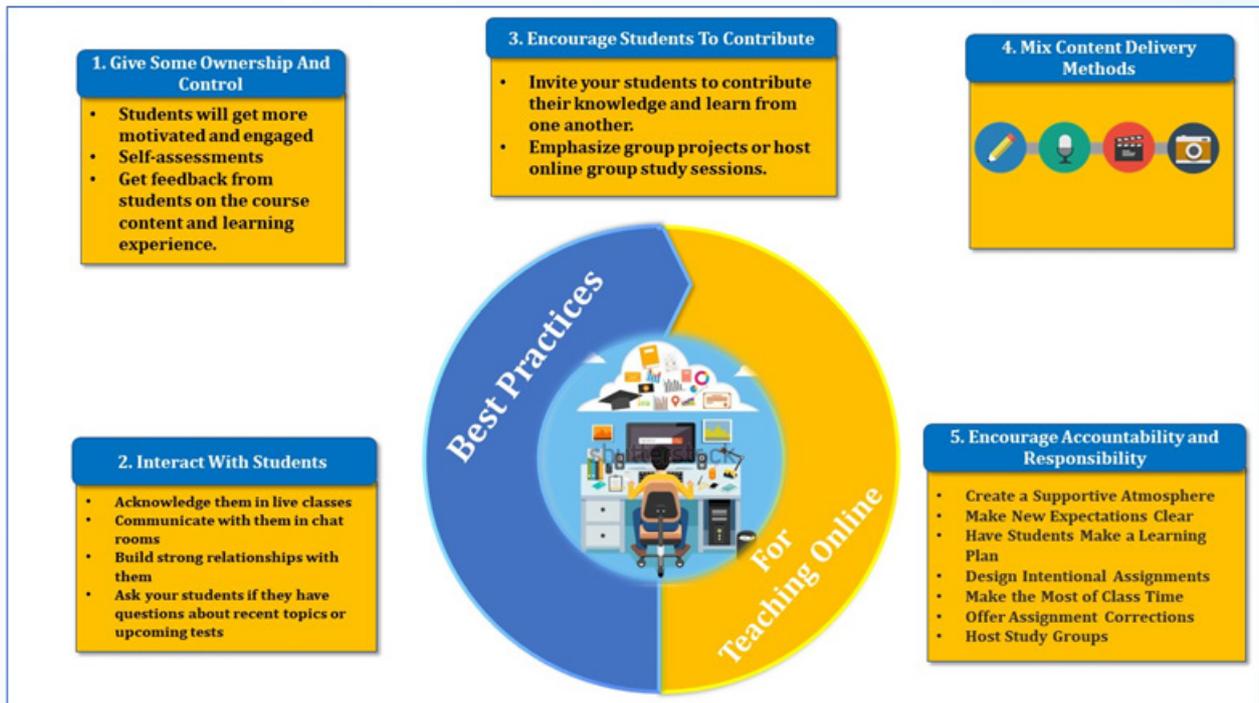


Figure 1 – Five Best Practices for Teaching Online in Higher Education

aims to share set of five best practices for teaching online in Higher Education. These five best practices were selected from teaching and learning research studies and best practices that have been developed over the past five years of online teaching and learning. Academics who follow these practices will increase the probabilities of providing an effective, efficient, and satisfying online teaching and learning experience.

Figure 1 depicts five best practices for teaching online in higher education. Next section will discuss each best practices in detail with example.

1. Give Some Ownership and Control

The idea of giving students some ownership and control means gives them more ownership and control in their online learning which makes students more responsive to education, keeps them more motivated and engaged in what they are learning, and makes them more willing to take on challenges. For this purpose, lots of activities can be used such as;

- give students more flexibility in homework
- depending on the nature of subject - measure students understanding in different ways by using short answer questions, two or three essay questions, polls questions, multiple-choice, fill-in questions. Varying the ways you test students could result in a better demonstration of their understanding since they will be able to show their knowledge different ways, they will be able to perform their skills differently and they will be able to communicate their retention in ways they are most comfortable.
- Provide freedom to use personalize content and materials - give students opportunities to choose their own books to read, relevant experiments to conduct, vocabulary lists to memorize, and problems to solve.
- allowing students to create their own schedule and then revise it when they realize it is or isn't working.
- help students to set their own goals at the beginning of each academic year/semester
- give students regular opportunities for self-assessment
- get students' feedback on your course or classroom. As lecturers, we are continuously

Digital Teaching and learning Tool	URL
	https://moodle.org/ Most of state universities in Sri Lanka use Moodle Learning Management System (LMS). Various Moodle activities such as short answer questions, two or three essay questions, polls questions, multiple-choice, fill-in questions can be used.
	https://www.gosoapbox.com/
	https://www.mentimeter.com/
	https://zoom.us/

Table 1 - Digital teaching and learning tools to give some ownership and control

evaluating students, but we should make sure that we offer them the chance to give us feedback as well. Therefore, it is better to provide opportunities for students to evaluate us as a lecturer, the course, or a specific assignment. This helps students feel heard and that they have a say in their learning. To achieve above activities, various digital teaching and learning tools can be used as shown in Table 1.

2. Interaction with Students

Interaction is an essential element in the learning process. In the educational settings either face-to-face or online, interaction can be threefold: learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-learner interaction. Online learning also has the potential to enhance interaction since it uses multidimensional forms of communication and interaction, i.e., simultaneous intimacy and distance, multimedia presentations, and hyper-searching. Interaction in online learning can be either synchronous where teacher and learner engage in a certain topic simultaneously or

asynchronous where participants control their own timetables and fit learning around their other commitments. The advantages of synchronous interaction are stimulating motivation, interactive participation, immediate feedback, user-friendly technological tools for effective learning, and costs and time savings. Synchronous interaction technologies include real-time two-way text-based online chat, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), instant messaging, real-time audio, application sharing, voice and video conferencing, shared electronic whiteboards, live assessment testing, and voting and audience-controlled tools. The advantages of asynchronous interaction are flexibility, time to reflect, anonymity or pseudonymity, no time-zone constraints, situated learning, and cost-effectiveness. Asynchronous interaction technologies include email, CD-ROMs, collaborative learning forums, listservs, bulletin boards, newsgroups, web pages, computer conferencing, video and audio streaming, and blogs. All these forms of interaction give online learning useful advantages. However, with the limited experience of online teaching, engaging

with students in online learning activities seems a challenging task for university lecturers in Sri Lanka. It is crucial to build the capacity of university lecturers to introduce digital teaching and learning tools to engage with students online learning activities.

As an academics, it is more important to identify and adopt different digital teaching and learning tools to engage with student online, and how to assess students at different points of the learning process and provide feedback. This understanding will help academics to effectively carry out online education thereby to measure student's engagement and progress in the learning process. As shown in Table 2, different digital teaching and learning tools have been given to help academics to rethink how to plan their online teaching and learning activities to engage with students effectively and identify relevant tools for the same purpose which might be helpful for academics to adopt in their online courses.

3. Encourage students to contribute

Ensuring active student participation is challenging in any classroom situation either in face-to-face or online. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, this year's move to mainly online teaching has presented unique difficulties as well as opportunities for academics when it comes to encouraging participation virtually and evaluating students' contributions.

In the online teaching environment, it is very important to make sure that we offer equitable participation options for our students and to ensure that everyone speaks but not just the loudest or most demanding students. During online sessions, we can equally invite our students to contribute their knowledge and learn from one another. Moreover, we can emphasize group projects or host more online group study sessions.

Online discussions give students the opportunity to reflect upon and apply what they've learned. Several tactics can be used to increase

Digital Teaching and learning Tool	URL
	https://zoom.us/
	https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software
	https://padlet.com/
	https://edpuzzle.com/
	https://www.socrative.com/

Table 2 - Digital teaching and learning tools to interact with students

student participation in online discussion. They are; embedded online discussion into course design and tied to learning objectives, emphasize participation in online discussions as a mandatory activity, explain to students why online discussions are an essential part of the learning process, how online discussions provide continual opportunities for students to reflect, recall, and apply new knowledge. Moreover, it is important to guide students that they require to post a specified number of thoughtful remarks either in initial posts or responses in online discussions and thereby promote quality of discussions not quantity. Online discussion guidelines should be shared among the online community, for example, ask students to respond thoughtfully and ask open-ended questions. Encourage students to share constructive thoughts and explain the value of diverse perspectives.

To achieve above activities, various digital teaching and learning tools can be used as shown in Table 3.

4. Mix content delivery methods

Interactive multimedia-based learning materials are required to facilitate effective and interactive online teaching and learning environment. Technological tools have made the task of creating expression through multimedia more easily available.

Multimedia involves a combination of multiple modes such as audio, text, graphics, animation, video and interactive content to present information for learners (Muthukumar, 2005). Multimedia-based learning has increasingly proliferated in educational sectors in national and international level, having been shaped by rapid technological advancements (Bagui, 1998).

Digital Teaching and learning Tool	URL
 PebblePad	https://www.pebblepad.co.uk/
	https://www.google.com/forms/
	https://docs.google.com/document/
 AnswerGarden	https://answergarden.ch/
	https://sites.google.com/
	https://my.bulbapp.com/

Table 3 - Digital teaching and learning tools to collaborate with students

Digital Teaching and learning Tool	URL
 POWTOON	https://www.powtoon.com/
 edpuzzle	https://edpuzzle.com/
 Kahoot!	https://kahoot.com/
 QUIZZ	https://quizizz.com/

Table 4 - Digital teaching and learning tools to use as mix content delivery method

In designing pedagogically sound interactive multimedia-based learning materials, a high premium need to be placed on leveraging a judicious mix of various presentation modes to cater to user's differing learning styles and needs (Muthukumar, 2005). Moreover, existing research has shown that multimedia-based learning materials must be changed according to students' level of intelligence, and their social and cultural background. This will ensure that learning is optimized which is essentially student-centred in nature in multimedia rich learning environments. Student-centred in the sense that learners have control over the pace of their own learning and are empowered to take charge of their learning trajectories. Mix content delivery methods or interactive multimedia-based learning materials are therefore required for enriching the student-centred learning and teaching and thereby increase equity of access to education as well as to improve quality of education. As shown in Table 4, following digital teaching and learning tools can be used in online teaching as mixed content delivery methods.

5. Encourage accountability and responsibility

In the online education environment, it is necessary to encourage accountability and responsibility among students because many students will struggle with the transition to online learning. Without lecture schedules and lecturers' supervision, students may struggle to stay focused and get their work done. Hence, designing your classes around accountability is a good way to help your students stay on track. It is further required to guide students to make this happen. For this purpose, supportive atmosphere should be created during this difficult and uncertain time because students may be feeling stress about the pandemic, loneliness since they have been isolated from their friends, and confusion about the online format. Lecturer should be able to make very clear, new expectations for example providing rubrics to mark online assignments or other assessments. It is important to promote students to make a learning plan to achieve online learning activities.

Digital Teaching and learning Tool	URL
 turnitin®	https://www.turnitin.com/products/feedback-studio
 peergrade	https://www.peergrade.io/
 mote	https://www.mote.com/
 Adobe Spark	https://www.adobe.com/express/
 go react	https://get.goreact.com/
 Flipgrid	https://info.flipgrid.com/

Table 5 - Digital teaching and learning tools to promote accountability and responsibility

Academics can design intentional assignments for students. These types of assignments will encourage students to complete the readings or watch the videos they have been assigned, students should be notified that their homework or exams cannot be satisfactorily completed without specific information from those sources. Host online Study Groups are another approach. Working in a group makes it easier for students to ask their peers for help and stay on track, with the added benefit of some social time to help alleviate loneliness. Host a study group strategy helps keep students more focused when it's time to work. Table 5 shows various digital teaching and learning tools that can be used promote collaborative online learning environment as well as to promote accountability and responsibility among students online.

Five good practices that are discussed in this paper will definitely increase the probabilities of providing an effective, efficient, and satisfying teaching and learning experience when teaching online in higher education.

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Good Practice in Higher Education: Some Insights from International Contexts

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that good practice in higher education should make a positive contribution, add value to students' learning experience and worthy of wider dissemination (DMU, 2018). According to Chickering and Gamson (1987, 1991), there are seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education: (1) encourages contact between students and faculty, (2) develops reciprocity and cooperation among students, (3) encourages active learning, (4) gives prompt feedback, (5) emphasizes time on task, (6) communicates high expectations, and (7) respects diverse talents and ways of learning. These principles can be generalized and applied in any type/level of education that takes place in higher education institutions. In this article, I discuss how these principles are put into practice in Higher Education in the United Kingdom (UK) mainly based on my experience in working in the higher education sector in the UK.

Study Programmes and Curriculum

Study Programmes and Curriculum

In programme and curriculum development, it is good practice to encourage faculty to link teaching directly to student learning and thereby making student learning the focus of teaching decisions (Saroyan et al., 2004). In other words, faculty is

encouraged to understand what student learning means, the purpose of student learning and wider social, cultural and economic factors related to student learning. This makes institutions analyse changing needs of the country/society and provide higher education which can address the growing needs. As a result, regular programme/curriculum revisions are undertaken. For example, Martin (2018) reveals that many higher education institutions in the UK review their curriculum aiming at enhancing quality of learning opportunities, which leads to "research-informed teaching, problem-based learning, work-based research projects, and electronic forms of assessment and feedback" (p. 1). In such initiatives, the existing course contents are regularly evaluated based on student feedback and research findings in relevant fields. Reflective practice among faculty members is another mechanism used in redesigning or revising the existing programmes/curricular. Universities also attempt to build up a strong research culture by encouraging not only staff research but also student research, incorporating cutting-edge research findings in course contents and organising regular research related activities.

Martin(2018)also highlights that higher education institutions in the UK understand the strong link that should be maintained between graduate skills/attributes and employability. In order to maintain this link, professional socialisation and personal development are addressed in combination in higher education. Since 21st century skills are sought after by employers in their employees, higher education curriculum provides opportunities for learners to develop and improve such skills. In these ways, employability is embedded to the curriculum. Involvement of employers, students and other stakeholders in defining the skills that students need to develop and maintaining close links between higher education institutions and employers are also apparent in the higher education sector in the UK. This includes modules developed based

on employer needs, collaborative research with various organisations and validation of programmes by partners. Career guidance opportunities such as one-to-one coaching are made available to students in order to help them secure their desired employment.

Teaching and Learning

Traditional teaching approaches are often criticised for not inculcating critical thinking ability, creativity and complex reasoning skills among students (McLaughlin et al., 2014). Therefore, innovative teaching approaches which address growing needs is a must in higher education. For example, technology enhanced learning is given prominence in UK higher education as digital literacy is an important skill needed for employment (Martin, 2018). Blended learning is another approach used in higher education in the UK. In most cases of blended learning, technology mediated online learning is used in combination with face-to-face classroom learning (Graham et al., 2013). In the asynchronous technology mediated learning phase, students are expected to engage in reading and text-based discussions and then attend the synchronous face-to-face lecture. The purpose of such an approach is to provide a more interactive learning experience for students and increase their critical thinking ability and creativity (Lee & Jang, 2014).

With the pandemic, the use of blended learning approach in higher education in the UK increased, and flipped learning became more common. In flipped learning, a combination of an asynchronous online lecture and a face-to-face interactive session is used (Bergmann & Sams, 2013). In higher education in the UK, virtual learning environments are maximally used to provide pre-class reading materials, lecture recordings and other asynchronous self-study activities. Students are expected to come to small-group synchronous (in-person or online) sessions with prior preparation. The synchronous sessions are mostly activity based

where students engage in collaborative group/peer tasks. Teacher-student and student-student dialogue is highly valued in these sessions. This approach deviates from seeing the teacher as a knowledge provider and student as the knowledge receiver. This type of an approach taps into several of Chickering and Gamson's (1987, 1991) principles of good practice: encouraging contact between students and faculty, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, and encouraging active learning. According to Chickering and Gamson (1987), use of computer assisted instruction encourages learners to spend adequate amount of time on learning. In other words, it underpins the good practice principle 'emphasizes time on task.' In addition to addressing these principles, this type of a teaching approach promotes problem solving skills, inquiry-based learning, and learner autonomy. Students become increasingly more independent and responsible of their learning through this process.

Academic writing is a key consideration when it comes to higher education. English is the dominantly used language in research publications in the world. Since academic writing features differ from features in other writing genres, academic writing may become challenging for not only non-native speakers of English, but also native speakers of English (Hyland, 2016). Academic writing patterns are also constantly changing due to reasons such as increasing use of digital tools (McCulloch et al., 2019). Due to these reasons, students in UK universities are provided regular academic writing support. This may include writing skills modules, regular workshops, drop-in sessions and one-to-one tutorials. The content of such support provision may include aspects such as referencing guidelines, how to avoid plagiarism, structuring academic documents such as essays and terminology use.

Assessment

Richardson and Dann (2018) highlight several ideas for good practice in assessment in higher education which are put into practice in the UK context. This includes clearly setting out assessment practices in course/module handbooks, providing clear information on the expectations, explaining assessment and feedback methods, providing samples/models and conducting assessment specific sessions. They also emphasise the need to maintain the relationship between teaching, learning and assessments.

Chickering and Gamson (1987, 1991) highlight that giving prompt feedback as one of the important principles of good practice in higher education. According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), there are seven good feedback practices. Good feedback (1) enables students to understand what good performance is (2) leads learners to self-assess and reflect upon their learning (3) provides students information about their learning (4) increases teacher and peer dialogue (5) inculcates positive motivation and increases self-esteem (6) informs learners how to bridge the gap between current and expected performance and (7) helps teachers shape their teaching. Feedback is one of the most important aspects in higher education contexts in the UK. For example, students are given written detailed comments on the assignments that they submit. This includes evidence of good performance and suggestions for improvement. In addition, formative tasks are used within the coursework in order to introduce assessment practices, make students aware of marking criteria and provide assessment practice. Common feedback sessions are also organised in order to provide an opportunity for students to clarify their doubts on assessment criteria and/or feedback that they receive. Assessment rubrics which indicate achievement criteria is used in both providing feedback and marks, so that learners understand

what they require to do additionally in order to improve their grades. According to Richardson and Dann (2018), it is important to map all grades to core criteria and subject-specific criteria in order to ensure the clarity of assessment.

Assessment tasks also tap into exploring students' analytical ability by evaluating their practical application of the concepts that they learn. A wide range of assessment types including essays, reports, presentations, video productions and practical tasks are used to assess different abilities and skills of learners. Universities also maintain academic integrity by using software such as Turnitin. Richardson and Dann (2018) highlight the importance of raising students' awareness on how similarity measures in Turnitin are interpreted by staff and how students themselves can use the software effectively in order to improve the quality of their work. Such practices can underpin the good practice principle, 'communicates high expectations' that the universities place upon learners. Continuous reflection on changes taking place and changing assessment practices based on the rising needs are also considered important (Richardson & Dann, 2018).

In addition, quality of assessment is ensured using several mechanisms such as blind second marking of samples of assessments and standardising marks where necessary. External examiners from similar programmes in other universities are invited to go through samples of assessments and feedback in order to ensure the standards of assessments.

Inclusion and diversity

Inclusive education "is concerned with minimising all barriers to learning and participation, whoever experiences them and wherever they are located within the cultures, policies and practices of a school" (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). This broad definition recognises barriers which may be created due to race, ethnicity, gender, socio-

economic factors, physical disabilities, different psychological conditions as well as learning difficulties. Booth and Ainscow (2002) emphasise the importance of increasing participation of students in the education process by reducing their exclusion from curricular, planning and implementing inclusive policy at institutional level, making changes in the teaching-learning-assessment process for the benefit of all students, recognising differences between students as resources to support learning, and strengthening relationship between schools and communities in order to make the education process more inclusive.

In the UK, universities pay especial attention to maintaining inclusivity among their community. For example, *Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence* (2018) report recommends improving accessibility of all materials provided to students, providing up to date reading lists, providing lecture recording facilities, use of plain English in lectures, diversifying the range of learning opportunities, approaches and assessment methods and using virtual learning environments to house materials for easy access in order to increase inclusivity. Some of the practices used in UK universities include providing additional time in assessments, and individual support services which attempt to ensure that learners with special education needs can receive similar benefits of education as their peers who do not have such needs. Through such initiatives, the good practice principle of respecting diverse talents and ways of learning is addressed.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice has been considered a major aspect of continuous professional development (Bleakley, 1999). It also encourages teachers to become critical practitioners, psycho-diagnosticians and facilitators of learning, learners within a community of practice and

those who ensure quality and efficiency of their own organisation (Zukas & Malcolm, 1999). UK higher education encourages teachers to be reflective practitioners. Revisions of curriculum, teaching content, teaching approaches and assessments take place through such reflections. In addition, student reflections on their learning are considered highly important and encouraged. Staff development is another key feature in UK higher education as it is essential in developing innovative practices (Martin, 2018). Regular staff development initiative and peer observations encourage sharing of good practice. Such initiatives attempt to develop academic, professional and pedagogic skills among staff members.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed some good practice recommended for and used in higher education in the UK in terms of programme/curriculum development and revision, teaching and learning, assessment, celebrating diversity and maintaining inclusion. One of the key highlights is the wider involvement of not only university staff, but also employers, other social organisations and students in shaping the higher education provision. Addressing emerging needs constantly based on critical reflection seems to be a major approach used in maintaining the quality of higher education provision in the UK.

Although higher education provision in different parts of the world varies in terms of socio-political, practical, cultural and economic conditions prevailing in these contexts, some of the good practices used in the higher education in the UK may be applicable to any context. For example, critical reflection on provision of higher education in their own contexts may provide insights to academic and professional staff as well as students in any higher education context. As Chickering and Gamson (1987) also highlight, implementing good practice very much depends on students and circumstances in individual

institutions. Therefore, it is the responsibility of staff and students of a particular organisation to develop and implement their own good practice to suit their needs. In doing so, they can consider the experience of staff and students in other contexts/countries and take some ideas on good practice from such contexts in order to come up with their own model of good practice in higher education.

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Good Practice in Higher Education Administration; Practical Considerations for Higher Education Administrators with Special Focus on State Universities in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

In any organizational structure the emphasis placed on good practice ensures better performance and optimum results. This review presents the perspective of an administrator to establish an effective governing structure by considering the best practices in the higher education setting especially in relation to Sri Lankan state universities. In the following sections, the review will shed light on a range of aspects that highlight good practices in higher education administration in the 21st century. The role of an administrator is in a state of flux owing to the ever-changing requirements of the world we live in today. Continuous training for the staff is therefore of tremendous importance to address and adapt to any transformation and to administer the much-needed professional development of the staff. Creating mechanisms to maintain standards in line with the quality assurance requirements comes under the purview of an administrator. Intending to adapt to the contemporary tech-driven digitalized world, good practices in higher education institutes are continuously evolving, and there is a need for the administrator to formulate policies accordingly. It is, however, important to note that the budgetary needs to execute strategies related to the good practice in higher education have to be scrutinized and carefully managed since state universities in Sri Lanka are

not autonomous but predominantly dependent on the government funds. The subsequent sections denote significant considerations for higher education administrators especially those who serve in the public universities. The review has a concluding remark on the well-established notion that a strong administrative support is a prerequisite for the efficient functioning of the state universities in Sri Lanka.

Staff Training, Development, and Assessment

Higher education change is driven by constant improvement, technology changes, measurement and evidence-based results - all areas that require either an overt or covert emphasis on quality improvement (Jacob, Xiong, & Ye, 2015). Research has already provided evidence for the efficacy of active and student-centered learning in the classroom (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006) but to what extent the concept has been put into practice in higher-learning classroom has been questioned by researchers (Austin, 2011). One of the recommendations highlighted in the book *Improving Instructional Quality; Focus on Faculty Development* is that the universities have to initiate campus-based professional development centers staffed with knowledgeable professionals who can effectively organize and deliver faculty professional development activities (Austin, 2011). The book further states the importance of giving opportunities to enhance the research skills of the academics and their awareness of labour market opportunities suitable for the students in their field (Austin, 2011).

Management capacity building in the higher education sector refers to the development of professional management skills of the academic staff and administrative support staff at higher education institutions (Mohiuzzaman et al., 2016). The establishment of Staff Development Centers (SDCs) in state universities is an attempt to uphold the recommendation by providing

campus-based professional development of both academic and administrative staff. Having understood the rapid changes in the global context of higher education, the Staff Development Center of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura has already commenced Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (CTHE) programme. So far, the Center has trained over 400 young academics from five different universities in Sri Lanka. In addition to CTHE, SDC provides an induction for all new recruits. However, it is paramount that these centers established in the state universities in Sri Lanka have a strong top-managerial administrative backing to validate their standing coupled with the financial assistance to ensure that they are fully functional and reach out to the faculties and departments across the university. In the book *Professional Development Programs at World Class Universities* (Jacob, Xiong, & Ye, 2015), following recommendations for staff development centers are brought forth after some comprehensive case studies on eight leading universities around the world.

1. The adaptability of the administrators to overcome many unique challenges and the skill for working collaboratively with faculty members. On the other hand, provision of financial and resource support to conduct research studies in practical instructional contexts, and apply the findings to improve the quality of professional development services and programs.
2. One-on-one faculty mentoring and guidance model is crucial and often the most sustainable as the research interests of academics cannot be grouped as they are unique.
3. Using synergy effect for constant reflection and continual improvement in faculty members' teaching and research practices. This is achieved when two to five faculty members who have the same or similar instructional and/or research need are grouped together. On the other hand, the organizational structure of

professional development centres should be evaluated on a regular basis to consider their organizational fit within the greater university in terms of institutional strategy, relevance, and instructional and research needs. The reason for this evaluation is that the centres that are able to develop linkages and networks with communities of excellence in research with similar-interest and teaching practice are the ones that are able to support and facilitate optimal practices through support structures of the respective centres.

4. Linking university libraries and the professional development centres preferably with the assistance of technology has a better outreach to both the workforce and students. In recent years, libraries also offer professional development services online through LibGuides that are open source and in the public domain.

5. Instructional feedback from students is an essential part of teaching improvement for any faculty member and should occur on a regular basis (each time a course is taught) and on a periodic basis (at least once every 3 years or more) from peer faculty members and/or administrators. Professional development centres can get involved with this instructional feedback process.

6. Professional development centres should be dedicated to ensuring the high quality of their services and programmes to attract faculty members, students and administrators. Some of the approaches that can be considered include individual counselling and mentoring services; online training seminars, podcasts and links to white papers on latest technology trends; peer reviews; courses on optimal use of research and instructional best practices; access to the latest hardware and research and instructional software; and university wide training workshops.

7. Being able to help faculty members determine the best medium(s) of instruction is important.

For instance, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) should contextualize the use of technology according to their own circumstances and needs, and realize that its ultimate value is to supplement, enhance and provide alternative delivery media of faculty members' instruction.

8. Professional development centres should work closely with university administrators at all levels to establish positive implementation policies and rewards guidelines. Perhaps most crucial is to ensure that each professional development initiative is a positive and meaningful experience regardless of the participant group. The recommended approach is to provide incentives whether monetary or otherwise.

Based on the writer's experience regarding top-level administrative functions, following recommendations to boost employee performance are worthy of further consideration as they are already practiced and followed in overseas universities.

1. Maintaining a performance indicator for the members of non-academic staff and select and reward the employee as the employee with the highest performance in the year.

2. Select and reward the best lecturer/professor of the year based on student feedback.

3. Implement a rewarding system to academic and non-academic staff for introducing new concepts/plans/projects/ that can be practically implemented for best practices in higher education. This rewarding system can be in the form of extra marks for promotions for introducing a new practice that can be practically implemented.

4. Introducing leadership/teamwork/mentoring, etc. training programs for academic and non-academic administrative staff at different levels of administration and making them compulsory

for certain administrative posts.

5. Making annual leave compulsory for better motivation and recreation.

6. Making department trips for two or more days with family members compulsory.

Planning and Organizational Management

It has been argued by the academic scholars that the administrators and decision makers can be heavily impacted by the continuously evolving sociopolitical context of higher education. To avoid a vague focus, educational leaders need to engage the members of their communities in careful strategic and academic planning activities (Hinton, 2012).

Rutgers University has proposed the following framework for creating and organizing the plan

1. Mission, Vision, and Values – reviewing the organization’s guiding principles as a useful reference point for planning, especially when determining how to allocate resources and measure achievements.

2. Collaborators and Beneficiaries – identifying critical stakeholders, with particular attention to their expectations for the development and implementation of plans.

3. Environmental Scan – examining cultural issues, resource concerns, and other factors that may impinge on the planning process.

4. Goals – identifying an organization’s aspirations in tangible, achievable, and measurable terms.

5. Strategies and Action Plans – translating goals into a series of concrete strategies and activities with appropriate timelines.

6. Plan Creation – describing goals and strategies

in a manner that is comprehensive, yet easily understood.

7. Outcomes and Achievements – monitoring progress and, most importantly, evaluating outcomes

The overall standing of the above seven factors indicate the need to have clear-cut goals with the priorities intact. In order to have the planning stage more organized, it is recommended that the leaders should approach the planning task in stages that include establishment of a planning committee comprised of key members, a strategic planning needs assessment, a comprehensive environmental scan, iterative consultation procedures that invite contributions from important internal and external stakeholders, and repeated sharing of planning document drafts (Webber, 2016).

Challenges and Recommended Interventions

In terms of governance of public universities in Sri Lanka, the regulatory control exercised by the University Grants Commission could hinder effective reform or innovative approaches initiated by the singular faculties of a university (Mohiuzzaman et al., 2016). The change-resistant governance structures need to be replaced with structures characterized by more autonomy and better “autonomy indicators.” The structure of a public university is more formidable when it is resilient to change thus suggesting the responsibility of policy makers to create a regulatory environment that encourages, rather than stifles, innovation at public universities and private institutions in order to expand access to good-quality higher education (Mohiuzzaman et al., 2016).

The report on Innovative Strategies in Higher Education published by the Asian Development Bank discusses the organizational management

in the state universities of Sri Lanka and highlights the importance of cross-border education that promotes the use of international best practices in higher education in Sri Lanka (Mohiuzzaman et al., 2016). To be more responsive to change and be more adaptive to modern managerial systems, the report further denotes the use of domestic and foreign managerial experience that opens pathways for cross-border education which promotes the use of international best practices in higher education in Sri Lanka.

Entrepreneurial Development in the University.

In developed parts of the world, the universities seek to be less state dependent and more autonomous through the concept of entrepreneurial identity (Soysal, 2017). Academic entrepreneurship though unfamiliar in practice for the state universities in Sri Lanka is considered to have an impact on the overall function of the universities particularly in the West. The term has been comprehensively defined as follows.

“Academic entrepreneurship is a practice performed with the intention to transfer knowledge between the university and the external environment in order to produce economic and social value both for external actors and for members of the academia, and in which at least a member of academia maintains a primary role.” (Cantaragu, 2012).

The balance and tension between increasing autonomy on the one hand, and continued control of the universities and external dependence on the other, is rather evident in the simple fact that in most countries the university reforms have made universities more dependent on sources other than the basic public funding (Christensen, 2010). The kind of independence the universities seek to gain is evident in the practice followed in Japan where the government has put additional pressure on universities to be efficient by cutting

their basic funding (Yamamoto, 2009).

The basic principle behind institutional autonomy is that universities operate better when they are in control of their own direction, development, and destiny. They are motivated to be more entrepreneurial if they can directly reap the rewards of their own efforts (Mohiuzzaman et al., 2016).

Monitoring Continuous Improvements to Strengthen the Performance-Based Culture

Organizations of higher education can be described as open systems, as they are influenced by and react to many external pressures – from parents, government, local communities, and business and industry (Bush, 1995). For some higher education institutions, continuous improvement may have been initiated from a genuine concern about improving the quality of educational services (Chambliss, 2003). While for others external demands such as from the governing boards require improvements in performance measures and increased accountability (Albert, 2002). In the United States of America, the performance-based funding in higher education institutes is deemed as an effort to improve academic accountability and believed to serve as a significant driver to data driven continuous improvement (Burke, 2000). Performance-based funding is a system based on allocating a portion of a state's higher education budget according to specific performance measures such as course completion, credit attainment, and degree completion instead of allocating funding based entirely on enrollment (Miao, 2012). The data from performance indicators show that the university's performance and activities have been improved or at least maintained by the adoption of incentive-based and performance-oriented budgeting (Yamamoto, 2009).

The Use of Information and Communication Technology in Administrative Procedures

One of the prime examples for resilience in the face of transformation is the manner in which the organizations are administered and monitored when the entire world started grappling with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The idea of working-from-home or functioning remotely used to be somewhat unfamiliar to many organizations, especially to the majority of the universities across the world. However, the presence of the IT advancements that have been rapidly developing over the past decades has provided feasible solutions to challenges that would have been otherwise impossible to overcome. In the public university system, the use of ICT for administration is a common practice, however, the use of advanced software capable of generating the databases needed for the fast and efficient retrieval of information for decision making has not been adopted (Mohiuzzaman et al., 2016).

Despite the challenges faced due to the insufficient usage of advanced ICT means, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura went forth towards a transition with a relatively high usage of IT since the year 2019. Transition to ICT based administrative and academic environment was possible due to the following reasons;

- User-friendly nature of LMS that provides step-by-step methodical approach for both the students and the lecturers to make the best use of all features of the LMS.
- Introduction of a Performance Evaluation Service where an online service is provided for the students to verify their attendance, lecturers' feedback.

- Establishment of an online portal that allows the students to access examination schedule and results.

- Introduction of an online meeting minutes management system.

- Establishment of a digital asset management system that maintains all the records of the assets in the faculty in clouds.

The Center for Digital Education and Professional Development (CDEPD) was established to ensure smooth execution of aforementioned digital practices to be followed by both the students and the staff of the faculty.

However, the lack of research on the use of IT in administrative tasks in Sri Lanka could perhaps highlight the reality of the public university administration where it urges the need to enhance the usage of IT. It comes as no surprise that the universities in general contend with a bulk of data and information that need to be systematically organized. Hence, the state universities that directly fall under the purview of the government need assistance of the provision of necessary infrastructure facilities and trainings. The administrators on the other hand should have the right attitude to embrace the novelties of the technology and ought to be more tech-driven to manage the workload more effectively and efficiently.

Strengthening the Culture of Innovation through University-Industry Collaborations (UIC)

In any National Innovation System, successful UICs bring numerous benefits and improvements in the innovation capacity of universities and industries that have had an impact on the national economy of the country (Wickramasinghe & Malik, 2016). The importance of such collaboration is further justified for the reason that a large number of research and projects conducted by

university students are not considered elsewhere after the graduation, overlooking the fact that these research ideas might have the potential to be commercialized via industrial collaborations (Wijesinghe, Hansson, Ekenberg, & Hettiarachchi, 2020).

To overcome the challenge of lack of interaction with the industries, it is recommended to set up industry interaction cells in the universities for which the direction is given by the higher level administrative body (Wickramasinghe & Malik, 2016). Studies show that industry professionals should know how to absorb the research output fully and transform into marketable products, and this can be facilitated by the industrial personnel who can match the level of research sophistication with that of the university (Awasthy, Flint, Sankarnarayana, & Jones, 2020).

Conclusion

This review attempts to discuss the best practices that the administrators engaged in the domain of higher education can consider to ensure the smooth functioning of a university. References were made to the generalized context of the public universities in Sri Lanka. Existing literature highlight that there are important areas that need special attention especially with regards to the use of modern advancements of IT when managing administrative functions. Moreover, the practice of academic entrepreneurship is also discussed in the review because of its productivity to obtain the sense of autonomy in managerial and planning tasks of a university. The review further denotes the importance of capacity building in terms of professional development in the university setting, and it is clear that the state universities have already implemented several programmes to uplift professional development. Several recommendations for best practices provided by leading journals including publications of Asian Development Bank are discussed in the review. The overall standing is

that the best practices should go in parallel with the ever-present transformations of the 21st century.

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Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

TOPIC - 01

Integration of Collaborative Learning for Online Delivery of Field Work based Design Studio Module: Lessons learnt from Action Research conducted during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Key research findings of the research

The research conducted to understand the potential of integrating collaborative learning for online delivery of field work-based project for the first time at the Department of Town and Country Planning of the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka yielded the following positive

outcomes;

- Students have improved their communication skills and self-esteem since individual tasks were performed by everyone in their own environment
- Self-confidence was improved as each student was given the opportunity to contribute in their own way in the group tasks.
- Exposure to international expertise and wide variety of online resources improved the students' knowledge and in particular, self-learning capacity to explore new knowledge in the field and reach beyond recommended readings.
- Students have become experts in the new

learning tools as they often used such tools to complete the tasks.

- Collaborative learning as opposed to competitive learning was enhanced as learning process timeline was flexible and students got the chance to undertake tasks in their own phase. Therefore, the students made sure everyone was in the same level before moving into next step of the planning process.
- Collaboration between students-students and teacher-students was improved. However, the following challenges were identified in the process;
- Teachers need to make an extra effort to understand the situation, in particular when setting meeting deadlines as students experienced challenges due to technical problems.
- Every step in the academic programmes needs to be monitored and adapted to suit the new online environment.
- Physical and mental issues created due to Covid 19 in the personal lives of both students and staff need to be considered.
- Unforeseen challenges like sudden connection drops, cancellation of online meetings, weather problems and health problems make the whole process a challenging task.

Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

TOPIC - 02

Action Research to improve interaction between students and lecturer in Virtual Student Induction Programme through a Flipped Lecture Approach

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Key research findings of the research

A study was conducted to improve interaction between students and lecturer in Virtual Student Induction Programme through a Flipped Lecture Approach. Accordingly, the students selected for the study were asked to answer some questions on "Dotstorming" wall. "Dotstorming" is an online platform used for real-time group brainstorming. Although some students did not submit answers in the first round, almost all the students responded and answered questions in the second round after students were allowed to write answers on the "Dotstorming" wall prior to the lecture and the written answers were discussed during the lecture. Therefore, it can be stated that the interaction between students and lecturer could be improved in virtual sessions by asking students to write answers for the given questions prior to the online session, and organizing an online discussion session with the students based on the answers provided.

Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

TOPIC - 03

Enhancing the graduation rate: A case study at the University of Vocational Technology

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Key research findings of the research

This study was conducted employing a group of diploma students of the University of Vocational Technology in Sri Lanka. The university offers courses as both weekday programmes and weekend programmes. Average performance of students in the weekday mode has shown to be weaker compared to students in the weekend mode specifically, in final year projects, which need self-initiation of students to complete the same. However, these students complete the taught modules successfully. It was observed that these students do well in structured situations and cannot take self-initiated actions. Therefore, it is recommended to increase learner-centred activities in course delivery from the beginning of any academic programme.

Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

TOPIC - 04

An Empirical View of The Use of Recorded Speeches In The ELT Classroom During The Period Of COVID-19

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Key research findings of the research

This study aimed at identifying the use of recorded speeches of tertiary level ESL students during the period of COVID 19. One hundred and fifty (N-150) undergraduates were taken using the random sampling method from a population of 400 undergraduates who were enrolled in the English intensive program in the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Ruhuna. Qualitative method was used to identify the challenges in the use of recorded speeches. In order to have the students' perceptions on recorded speeches, a task was designed for students to get the first-hand experience on recorded speeches and questionnaires were also provided to receive the feedback from them. Results in this study revealed that there is an urgent need to implement these types of technology-based activities in ESL classrooms to enhance students' speaking skills and their motivation. This appears to be solution for the ESL learners who are generally anxious to express themselves face to face in a physical ESL classroom. However, it was observed that there was a general lack of technology training for students with regard to quality of the video, attaching the e-documents and formatting issues. It was disadvantageous for the students who were lacking these technological facilities.

Therefore, an appropriate training needs to be given to the students before implementing such technology-based activities and assignments.

Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

TOPIC - 05

Action Research on How to Overcome the Challenges in The Online Teaching-Learning Process During Covid-19 Lockdown in Non-state Higher Education Platforms

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Key research findings of the research

This action research focused on higher education course delivery modes and teaching strategies for adult professional students in a faculty of education that offer international degree programs in a private international learning center in Sri Lanka. The data were collected using different instruments, including secondary data, reflective journal and online survey questionnaire for over three semesters during the pandemic. Findings indicate that students enrolled in master's degree programmes prefer asynchronous, self-regulated independent study modes while bachelor's degree students need synchronous interaction with interactive lectures. This study has implications for online technology use in synchronous and asynchronous interactions and online teaching and learning strategies in higher education programmes. Keeping pace with the emerging technology applications demands ongoing professional development and reflective practice for academic staff at higher learning institutions to meet the requirements of the modern tech-based world.

Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

TOPIC - 06

Perception and preference for online education among final year undergraduates in selected state universities in western province, Sri Lanka during COVID-19

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Key research findings of the research

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted to identify the perception and preference for online education among final undergraduates in selected state universities in Sri Lanka namely the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, University of Colombo, University of Kelaniya, University of Moratuwa, and University of Visual and Performing Arts. Convenient sampling strategy was used. The data collection was carried out through an online survey using a well-structured self-administered questionnaire with close-ended questions. Descriptive statistics and Chi-square test were used to analyze the data. Results show that significant numbers of respondents (91.2%) have used online learning for the first time during the lockdown, majority of the respondents (83.9%) are using smartphones for attending sessions. The majority of respondents (51.4%) have a good perception of online learning. Results of the study indicate that a more comfortable environment was ranked as the major benefit. Data speed (75.8%) was identified as the main bottleneck factor in online learning. Student readiness was the major determinant for the smooth conduct of online classes. Many participants in this research study reported that technological constraints were the main challenges in their

online learning experience. The findings highlight that if Sri Lanka wants to move towards online education, it should focus on its internet facilities as a pre-requisite. The online classes will succeed only if all the students have internet access. Minimum technical requirements such as internet connectivity, devices, and software requirements need to be fulfilled for an optimal learning experience among undergraduates in state universities.

Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

TOPIC - 07

An Action Research on Improving Students' Mathematics Learning Using Collaborative Approaches

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Key research findings of the research

This action research was conducted to use collaborative approaches in classroom practices to improve student learning while improving collaborative skills among the students. Participants of the action research were Grade 8 students (N=20) from a type 1AB school in Kandy District, Central Province, Sri Lanka. The lesson unit "Directed Numbers" was selected to do the teaching learning process. Three-student groups were created, and the pre-test post-test data analysis suggested that all three groups showed improvements in marks. Groups showed gradual improvement in their communication, presentation skills and team-work abilities. Observations also revealed that the majority of students actively participated in collaborative working more than usual classroom situations. Analysis of interview data revealed that students improved their perceptions regarding mathematics learning. They mentioned that collaborative group working was interesting. They were also of the view that through the peer discussions they could easily memorize the concepts. It was also observed that students shared their responsibilities and ideas to achieve better marks for the group. Even though students were interested in the collaborative learning approach, they still preferred teacher's support for

learning. The results suggested that collaborative learning was useful to enhance the students' understanding of the subject, developing skills and promoting individual accountability among the students in group work.

Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

TOPIC - 08

Action Research of Approaches Used to Improve Student-Content Learning Tasks of Undergraduates Through “Take-Home Teaching Tools” Strategies

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Key research findings of the research

An action research was conducted to observe the effectiveness of KWL learning method (“What I already know?”, “What I want to know?” and “What I have learnt?”) and SQ4R learning method (Survey (skim/scan), Questions (what to find out?), Reading (Proceed to read), Recording (what should I write?), Reciting (what was less clear?) and Reviewing (did I miss any? / Post-reading checking). Accordingly, a reading task related to the discipline of the students was given along with the KWL table. During the lecture in the following, questions were raised by the lecturer based on the given reading material. However, there were limited number of responses only. Therefore, the same reading passage was given along with the SQ4R table, and the students were asked to answer the questions using SQ4R method. It observed that the student engagement was quite high during the questions and answers session. Therefore, it can be concluded that “take-home teaching step-tools” namely “KWL” table and “SQ4R” systems can be used to enhance learning tasks of undergraduates during distance teaching. Of the two, SQ4R system proved to be more effective.

Key Research Findings: NARCHE 2021

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Action Research of Approaches Used to Improve Student-Content Learning Tasks of Undergraduates Through “Take-Home Teaching Tools” Strategies

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