A policy framework for distance education support services: a model

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Abstract

In this article, the author reports a model and policy frame work for Distance Education Support Services (DESS Model) at the OUSL and other institutions which offer distance mode teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. The article addresses the situation of governmental policy-making with regards to the distance education in Sri Lanka. Using models from Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1998) Sri Lankan higher authorities in the distance education field met and discussed about the availability of national polices. Further, discussions were held with administrative officers who work at the OUSL and   policy documents were referred to collect the data for institutional policies. Although distance education (DE) programmes in SL is growing, policy development is lacking. It was revealed that there are no national policies related to the distance education, support services but existing policy guidelines related to the external degree have been amalgamated to conduct online courses which were started with the assistance of Distance Education Modernization Project. Institutional policies are available at OUSL but no particular written documents There is a clear need for well-planned, continuous, systematic policy framework for student support services in the country. It is highly recommended that formulation of national policies for distance education on DESS model to render equal student support service to all Sri Lankan distance learners.

Keywords: Policy framework, Distance education support services, Distance education policies, DESS model

1. Introduction

Distance education (DE) is an educational mode way back to 150 years. Distance mode teaching and learning has become popular around the world during the last decades with the advancement of technology. IT can provide more opportunities to learner and reduces the distance among communicators for global, competitive learning environments among countries.

Open and distance learning, especially delivered and facilitated by the internet and advances of information communication technologies (ICT), now offers new ways in which to widen access to education. Due to that, to day   the entire educational landscape in almost all the countries in the world is undergoing vast transformation, and distance education is a major contributor to that change. Further, throughout the world, new developments in distance education are adding to the field a day by day. As a result of development of ICT, the mode of delivering education and support services are changing. The recent rise of free online courses (MOOCs, TOOCs) are example for that. These courses will be offered free path to enhance the professional achievements of the learners. Due to these free online courses, some argue that there is a revolution in education in which online courses profoundly change how people learn. Due to the flexibility available in distance mode learning, number of students entering for the distance mode courses is increasing rapidly than earlier.

1.1 Student Support Service

The proper function of distance education system is depending on strong student support system as students do self study at convenient places using study materials and other learning resources. Hence those resources are required to sustain a quality distance education programme. Resources should be existed at the parent organization to support students, faculty, and the programme or institution towards the achieving goal of effective and appropriate learning. Responsive and flexible human resources, knowledge, skills, policies, procedures, and technical infrastructure enable quality practices and contribute to quality results. Resources, well designed instructions, hands-on training, learning tools such as libraries, information archives etc. are given through the support service (SS). Therefore, procurement, development, and adaptation of resources to motivate learners through SS are ongoing process.

There are number of components in student support services (SSS) such as information support through libraries and web pages, management of the institution and regional services, financial services, counseling and welfare

services etc.. Therefore, it is necessary to develop learner support system fully to maximize the advantages of the DE system and to maximize disadvantages available in the system.

Further, a policy statement from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2000) suggests that institutions offering distance education need to provide adequate access to an appropriate range of SSS including admission, financial aid, advising, delivery of course materials, placement and counseling. Same idea is having with Kim, Bo-Won (et.al) (2005) and states about the integrated learner support system and discus, it is necessary in 05 steps, such as admissions stage, adaptation stage, studying stage, implementation stage, and evaluation stage.

However, Simpson (2000) defines a learner support system as

> "all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies. These include the academic support which deals with supporting students with the cognitive, intellectual and knowledge issues of specific courses or sets of courses".

Gunawardena also emphasizes the importance of having SSS and state "the strong support system will lead to cope the feeling of isolation, increase student retention, solve personnel problems or barriers and also help in learning skills development (Gunawardena,2000). Simpson is also having same idea and states that students and the education system are closely related through the SSS and both cannot exist alone (Simpson, 2000).

Lekamge (1999) supports Gunawardena and Simpson, states that "at the initial stage of distance learning students should be provided proper guidance and counseling through SS which should be able to develop self-study pattern". Kumar (et al), (2000) points out that the strong support system will help in the successful completion of a degree and reduce the drop out rate. Similar idea is having with Simpson (2002) and points out that SS is a vital element in any Open Distance Learning (ODL) system and further explains presenting three reasons such as, practical, theoretical, and moral reasons. Under the practical reason, Simpson discusses the importance of effective SS and how it is affected to increase retention rates in ODL system. In this way, many authors report the importance of learner support service required by the distance-lifelong learning institution is still disregarded by many institutions because of that, there is no systematic work road-map related to its execution.

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), just as many other institutions all over the world, is very concerned about student satisfaction on facilities provided for their studies. This is because decrease of student satisfaction has been identified as a major factor, which leads to dropout of students. Undoubtedly this is wastage of resources both from the institutional point of view and the students' point of view. Therefore, in order to minimize this situation open educational institutions engage in efforts of increasing student satisfaction on facilities provided for their studies. The main thrust of these efforts is to provide SS to students so that their studies can be facilitated and from that their satisfaction about studying can be improved. Through that student retention rate can be increased.

The OUUK (Open University of United Kingdom) suggest that support given to the distance learners based on the experience of the learner supporters' and both their own learning and of the learners they worked with. Further, states SSS is dependent on number of variables including organizational, cultural, institutional policies, delivery system and the learners. ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) Guidelines for Extended Campus Library Services (1990) too states six basic elements which were approved by the Standard Committee of the American Library Association. The six elements are management, finance, personnel, facilities, resources and services. The philosophy behind the provision of these elements is to create a suitable learning environment through SS for the distance learners who are in any continent.

Many DE theorists (Wedmeyer, Keegan, Holmberg) and researchers emphasize the importance of SSS in distance mode system and have suggested many possible SS and framework for its planning.
Trait presents his conceptual framework which was built around six core elements for planning SS. The six elements includes, student cohort characteristics, course/programme demand, geography, management system, technological infrastructure and scale.
Developing study pattern to motivate learners for self studying, increase the student retention rate, cope the feeling of isolation, developing cognitive skills, providing access to resources, providing answers to administrative and other problems were the main SSS that should be introduced to the distance learners to make their learning successful. Therefore, it is vital to give better equal support service to distance learners to motivate them on proper plan with relates policies on that plan.
Nevertheless, many questions basic to DE still remain unanswered in the field in all most all developing

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countries. This is especially true in the policy arena. With some exceptions, policy-oriented frameworks that guide practice in the distance education movement are just now emerging in developing countries in the world.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Distance Education Policies
After reviewing the national and international distance education literature (Berge 1998; Epper 1999; Frantz and King 2000; Gellman-Danley 1995; Gellman-Danley and Fetzner 1998; King, Lacy, McMillian, Bartels, and Freddolino 1998; King, Nugent, Russell, Eich, and Lacy 2000; King, Nugent, Russell, and Lacy 1999; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek 2000), Warnapala, 2009, it can conclude that most postsecondary settings lack a "systems" perspective to distance education policy development.

Policy is defined here as a written course of action (e.g., statutes, institutional mission, procedures, guidelines, or regulations) adopted to facilitate program development and delivery in distance education. Policies are not courses or syllabi. (King,2000)

The necessity of national policies for education and DE/ODL policy in a country is must as decisions are made according to the policies, rules and regulations of the country.
Litto opines that policies should be formulated according to the necessity of the society but not according to the political necessities,

> "education policy brings in a more idiosyncratic set of actors …not every change in the area of education is politically feasible". (Litto, 2008)

It was revealed that free education for all was adopted as a matter of state policy in the island in 1945 and policy remains unchanged. Literature review revealed that many scholars, and policy literature have been emphasized the necessity of DE to Sri Lanka. Further the need for expansion of distance education system and Higher Education (HE) policy which can focus on development needs of the country is emphasized. The basic assumption underlying this policy is to create opportunities for students who cannot find places within the conventional university system and adaptation of new technology for distance education.
Warnapala (2009) and Fernando (2003) emphasis the necessity of changing policies of creating more opportunities to meet the growing demand of higher education. Further describes need of development oriented HE policy in this way, "a new kind of institutional diversification is necessary to bring about changes, in our context, need to be development oriented…think in term of a development oriented HE policy for Sri Lanka, and in my view, it needs to be given priority at this point in time. (Warnapala, 2009) Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1998) states, "advanced policy deliberation and development is essential to the success of distance learning progammes and their students". They proposed a set of seven policy development issues and are given below in table 1.

Policy Development Area	Key Issues
1) Academic	Academic calendar, course integrity, transferability, transcripts, evaluation process, admission standards, curriculum approval process, accreditation
2) Fiscal	Tuition rate, technology fee, FTE's, consortia contracts, state fiscal regulations
3) Geographic	Service Area Regional limitations, local versus out-of-state tuition, consortia agreements
4) Governance	Single versus multiple board oversight, staffing, existing structure versus shadow colleges or enclaves
5) Labor-Management	Compensation and workload, development incentives, intellectual property, faculty training, congruence with existing union contracts
6) Legal	Fair use, copyright, faculty, student and institutional liability
7) Student Support Services	Advisement, counseling, library access, materials delivery, student training, test proctoring

Table 1: Policy Development Areas for Distance Learning
(Adopted from Gellman-Danley, B. and Fetzner M. J. (1988)

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In addition to that King, (et.al) (1998) includes two more areas that should be considered when developing policies in distance mode teaching and learning system.

   a. *Technical*–systems reliability, connectivity/access, hardware/software, setup concerns, infrastructure, technical support (staffing), scheduling, costs;
   b. *Cultural*–adoption of innovations, acceptance of online/distance teaching, understanding distance education (what works at a distance), organizational values.

The development of a national ODL policy may well fit into the category of an "ill-illustrated" policy issue since many of the factors on which good planning depend are not under the purview of educational policy makers…. . Haughey,(2008)

Further findings shows that ''This finding reinforces what most observers might expect: Campuses are more involved with academic, faculty, and student issues, …, though there may be a need for significant distance education policy development in other areas also."

Gellman-Danley, B. and Fetzner M. J. (1988) states that clearly, advanced policy deliberation and development is essential to the success of distance learning programs and their students.

Keeping up to date with technology is a major challenge for educators. Converting courses to an on-line format requires technology and instructional methodologies in new ways. The "Quality on the Line" report prepared by the nonprofit institute for HE Policy (2000) has specified that faculty members must be assisted in the transition from class room teaching to on-line instruction. The result of the survey indicates that such support is not yet available to most instructors.

Academic policies include evaluation of the learner and the instructor. If a course or program is taken at a distance, evaluation is essential for the successful continuous improvement of the curriculum and the delivery method. Learner evaluation, too, becomes more varied in light of testing, proctoring and assurance of student integrity. In the same way legal and support services policies are central to success to any academic programme and useful to assess quality of the education and the satisfaction of the learner because production of quality skillful graduates is a responsibility of the institution. Therefore policies are important in distance mode teaching and learning than conventional mode teaching and learning.

3. Present Scenario
The Minister of HE and the UGC is the authorized government institutions formulating national policies at all levels of HE.UGC has sections and standing committees which deal with various levels and components of university education such as:
- University Education
- Distance Education
- Non-formal Education
- Special Education so on

But, it is unfortunate that there is no distance education policy framework even though mode of DE teaching and learning initiated in 1980 by starting OUSL by a act of Parliament. Further, number of online distance courses started many privet and government institutions in 2009 with the financial support of DEMP project. Although the SL government is committed to distance education as mentioned in Mahindachintana, there is no national policy framework to oversee further implementation of distance education in the universities.

UGC standing committee of DE convener states that they have incorporated external degree guidelines to the distance learning mode also. It is a question how external guidelines are tally with the DE mode tg and lg. However, there are Acts of parliament and policy documents which recommended among others the implementation of institutions of distance education.

Therefore, the need for expansion of distance education system which was established in 1970s in Sri Lanka (SL) and well planned higher education policy which can focus on development needs of the country is highly needed

today. The basic assumption underlying this policy is as mentioned earlier to create opportunities for students who cannot find places within the conventional university system. The social needs of the people are increasing day by day and education is one of the most important social needs of the people. Due to that life long access to education is becoming a national priority in SL as many countries in the world. More adults enter higher education same as many youngsters also seek higher education and try to enter university. As a result of that there is a spurring new partnership between schools higher education institutions. Due to the flexibility available in DE system, demand for distance mode courses is increasing rapidly. Hence, that there is a challenge before the Sri Lankan higher authorities who are in decision making level in the education field. It is the need for expansion of DE system and it's policy which can focus on development needs of the country; the basic assumption underlying this policy is to create opportunities for students who cannot find places within the conventional university system.

National Education Commission (NEC) report on National Policy Frame Work for Higher Education presented in 2009 emphasizes only on (policy-6 under Distance mode of HE) expansion of distance mode education to cater higher demand of higher education by introducing dual mode courses, establishing distance mode teaching units in conventional universities and facilitating necessary staff for distance learning. The NEC has not considered about overall national DE policies, specially academic, administrative and support service policies even after 29 years later of the establishment of open distance education system in the country. The NEC has not paid any attention on DE polices and legislations except expansion of the distance mode teaching NEC think that de is a part of education as a whole and does not require specific legislation.

There were three recent initiatives for offering distance mode courses in Sri Lankan universities. The IRQUE project QAA under the UGC, Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) were initiates to start online courses. All these initiatives were attempted to address the deficiencies identified in the Sri Lankan university system, especially the need to improve relevance and quality and to extend access to tertiary education. As a result of that in 2011 few leading universities and private educational institutions were started online distance mode courses to cater higher demand available in the county for tertiary education. Online courses which is conducting in SL currently is a shadow of the external pattern. Because at the discussion it was revealed that Commission Circular 932 (2010) which was prepared for external degree offering, has amalgamated to on line courses with out considering the study pattern of the distance mode system by the authorities in SL.

Therefore, all the programmes which are currently running are considered as external programmes and functioning without proper national and institutional policies, rules and regulations. Hence that the country highly need is a coherent DE policy framework and the formation of a vision for the long-term development of a comprehensive and diversified higher education system which can contribute to national growth.

4. The Study Approach

The analysis mainly embraced two approaches. The first approach was a documentary review of documents on open and distance education national and institutional policies in SL. As I could not find proper document on national policies except acts I went for second approach, face-to-face discussions. The main objective was to get the information on national policies and to aware sources and documents where the policies are included. With that objective, I discussed with some key stakeholders in open and distance education at the Open University of SL, UGC, National Higher Education Commission and National Institute of Education. They were DVC, Commissioners, directors, heads, lecturers as well as registrars.

5. Why DESS Model is necessary?

The OUSL is the leader in distance mode teaching in SL and currently many conventional universities and few other private educational institutions are conducting distance mode programmes on different fields with the help of DEMP since 2009. In Sri Lanka, some institutions prefer to operate distance mode programmes under existing rules, conditions and situations with out considering learning pattern of the students while OUSL as leader of the ODL method is struggling to create new guidelines. Generally, the policies are mainly related to the academics, students and administrators as presented by the Gallen. The faculty deserves recognition for their development and instructional expertise in working with distance learning initiatives. Students deserve strong programmes with high academic integrity and sense of transferability. Administrators require educational accountability and fiscal stability.

However, open and distance education sector is subject to varying laws, policies, rules, regulations and practices imposed by government legislators, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, professional associations, academic associations, student bodies, credential evaluation and recognition bodies, regional and international organizations, and educational institutions themselves via their internal strategic and operational planning. In the same manner, Sri Lankan distance learners who registered at DEMP assisted courses are treated as external students due to the 932 circular.(2010). 932 circular is prepared to initiate external degree programmes in conventional universities. They are not allowed to use libraries and other resource centres available in the university. The main reason for treating them as that is the lack of national and institutional policies and guide lines for distance education system in the country.

932 circular states that awareness should be done to the learners at the orientation programme about available facilities in the library, computer laboratories, and learning materials available sources etc. and it further mention if facilities are not available at the particular university students are allowed to use facilities available at Open university regional centres. Further, under section 5- programme delivery and learner support, states that all students must be provided with a list of learning materials, available sources of those materials and information as regard to facilities available to them in the library and computer-based learning centres at the 'day class'. Just informing about the available facilities are not enough for distance learners as they do not have self learning experiences. They should be paid more attention and better support service should be given to them to motivate the learners.

Further, Technology is developing day by day introducing new features to the field of education hence that method of communication is also changing. Communication is the most vital matter in distance education because distance learners do self study and they need to communicate with peers, tutor mentors, university administrators, lecturers etc.. According to the generation wise categorization of distance learners by Taylor (2001) Sri Lankan distance learners are in the fourth generation and use internet for studies. Therefore, they need developed communication methods to continue their studies. The need for proper communication method for distance learners was emphasized by many theorists in their theories; theory of Independent study introduced by Charles A. Wedemeyer, Holmberg through his Guided Didactic Communication as well as empherical studies on DE. Therefore, it is proved that distance learners need proper communication method through successful support service.

In addition to that, proper national information policy for Sri Lanka is also highly needed today as e-resources are sharing among academics, students both distance and conventional and service providers.

There are problems like disciplinary differences, culture, intellectual property constraints, lack of data on user experiences, the relevance and quality of OER in current use and obstacles to use. Therefore, policies and rules on use of, sharing of and accessing of OER should be formulated. Further, no government or institutional policy reflecting current thinking on OER in SL and it is a big problem. Because digital archives, records management systems, hybrid libraries, documentation centres, broadcasting, media, sharing information and sharing resources are done by the service providers as well as vendors. In addition to that many Sri Lankan universities have already started to use OER and many of them have archives and links etc.

It is time to discuss on copyright, fair use, liability for inappropriate electronic messages, and many other technological complexities as technology is using heavily for education. The other main reason is that Sri Lankan copyright law is not supporting distance mode teaching and learning. The copyright act (2003) emphases only on conventional teaching even though DE education was initiated in SL in 1980 with establishment of OUSL. Photocopying of educational materials under fair use is not allowed in DE system. Therefore, policies should be formulated covering all technological issues, copy right issues, OER issues, national information system etc. pertaining to the DE.

Further Haughey (2008) quoting Dodds and Youngman (and states 1994) presents 06 factors that policy makers has to consider before starting DE courses. Out of six factors one factor is related to the resources and it is that,

The appropriate institutional arrangement and the capacity for developing and maintaining and effective DE system in terms of recurrent resources, management capability,

Due to these issues the regulatory framework itself is complex and multi-level covering acts of parliament, policy, rules, governance and funding structures and operating at international, regional, national and local government level and even at institutional level should be considered when formulating policies to create better SSS for Sri Lankan distance learners.

5.1 Proposed policy frame work and DESS Model
Proposed possible DESS model prepared considering above matters is given in figure -2 below. It covers key

issues that should be considered when formulating policies. It further, reports details information about responsible persons for preparation of polices to give support services and possible communication ways that can be used at the policy preparation time.

Policies related to provision of library support, counseling, social and cultural issues categorized in DESS model are summaries in Policy Frame Work and are given in figure 1 below.

Policy area	Key issues that should be considered when formulating national and institutional policies	Component responsible	Available tools
National information policy	SWOT analysis should be done to understand strengths weaknesses, opportunities, Threats of all Sri Lankan higher education institutions. Need survey should be done to understand necessities of online and distance learners in the country.	UGC, Faculty, Library	Print, WWW, e-mail, Phone, meeting, workshop
Library support	Library services – delivering requested materials, Web base library resources Reciprocal borrowing and returning OER- access, usage, sharing, archival issues, Legal- copy right, Fair use, IPR E-resources – access, usage, sharing, Use of OUSL regional library facilities by OUSL student and by other learners Library membership Hands-on training – Internet browsing	Library, Faculty,	Phone, e-mail, discussions, meetings
Cultural	Acceptance of on-line / distance teaching – orientation, discussions, awareness programmes Adaptation of new innovations – awareness programmes, training sessions Organizational values – Understanding of DE-	Faculty, SAD	Print, phone, e-mail, meeting, workshop
Counselling	Well designed instructions - before joining and after registration for the course, after graduation, for further study, job opportunities.	Faculty, SAD	Print, phone, e-mail, orientation
Financial	Course fee payment methods, payment method when sharing among other faculties and using computer labs available at parent organization, and laboratories if OUSL regional facilities are using other universities etc. Payment method for library membership Scholarships, other financial aids,	Faculty, RES, Student Affaires Division, Administration	e-mail, orientations, meetings, Regional and study centres
Labs and other facilities	Computer labs, share NODE access centres, OUSL regional centres	Faculty, RES, SAD,Library	e-mail, post, www, Regional and study centres
Social support	Scholarships,Welfare activities, refreshment/Canteen etc.	Student AD, Faculty, Administration Finance	Phone, e-mail, www, print,

Figure 1 - Policy analysis framework and DESS model

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6. Discussion and Recommendations

This paper has provided an analysis of distance education policy in Sri Lanka. It has attempted to highlight the national policies and institutional setting of distance education providers with regards to SS and challenges facing decision makers in Sri Lanka. This paper finally tries to suggest essential components that would form a better environment for distance learners in Sri Lanka.

From the findings, it is clear that there is a lack of coherent policy for distance education at the national level. Consequently distance education programmes in higher education are generally disjointed and run on ad hoc manner.

There is an urgent need to carry out SWOT analysis survey to understand the strengths and weakness of each institution to make available equal facilities at each institution to render similar support service to distance learners/online learners is necessary to design and implement the learner support system considering DESS model and areas pointed out by Gellman-Danley, and Fetzner (1988)), King, (et.al) (1998) to overcome the socio-psychological isolation, limitation of information, and a lack of substance on the educational relation caused in the distance education system in Sri Lanka.

At the highest level of decision-making within the general education framework, people have little understanding of the requirements of distance education (Commission Circular 932). This should be highlighted in national distance education policy framework. The UGC has limited structures to develop and implement effective supporting policies. However, it is evident that the current base of expertise in distance education is very thin and there are many people who do not understand principles and practice of distance education. Efforts should be taken by leading distance education experts in the country to influence decision makers to tackle a bill in Parliament on formulation of policies on Open and Distance Education in SL.

Lack of infrastructure, equity of access to ICT and professional competence in open and distance learning remain important barriers in Sri Lanka and it's a challenge to the government also. Even though online courses were started by many institutions in Sri Lanka, we are still in between third and fourth generation of distance education according to the Tailer's categorization.

Thus, student support services must be redefined and implemented systematically after formulation of support service policies to suite Sri Lankan context and it must be continually evaluated to ensure satisfaction and success among all (government uni/private universities) students.

There is an urgent need to carry out SWOT analysis survey to understand the strengths and weakness of each institution to make available equal facilities at each institution to render similar support service to distance learners/online learners.

Therefore, it is recommended that

- The government needs to develop and articulate national policies for the development of distance education and student support services.
- The University Grant Commission (UGC) should establish a section that should specifically deal with distance education programmes, its polices, functions, evaluation etc. in both public and private universities.
- The UGC shall assure that the institution's administrative policies and procedures allow for an effective and efficient distance education support infrastructure with sufficient resource allocation to maintain the quality of offerings and services.
- National Education Commission (NEC) should put in place national and institutional policies and guidelines for the establishment of Distance Education programmes.
- There is need to commission relevant policy research to provide baseline information on existing Distance Education programmes conducted by government and private universities.

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