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CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT METHODS: CRITICAL REVIEW FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT OF THE POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION PROGRAMME OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Integration of computer technology into the teaching-learning process will help teachers to organize their teaching-learning process in an efficient manner. But due to the thirty years of internal unrest situation, teachers in Northern Sri Lanka did not receive enough training on integrating computer technology into the teaching-learning process and in turn, they did not attempt on their own, to integrate computer technologies in their teaching-learning process. Therefore, this paper investigates the possibilities and challenges faced by teachers in Northern Sri Lanka to integrate the computer technology in their teaching-learning process. Quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used in this study within a framework of a survey research design. The study was undertaken in the district of Jaffna which is located in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The total number of teachers teaching in Jaffna district is 7643. To encompass a diversified representation in the sample, schools which were seriously affected by the internal unrest were selected purposively. The questionnaire survey was distributed

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among the teachers who were physically present in the selected schools at the time of the side visit for data collection. Out of 200 teachers, 103 teachers returned their completed questionnaires. The data were collected using the questionnaire and closed ended questions were analyzed by applying elementary quantitative techniques. Open ended questions were analyzed qualitatively. The study revealed that majority of the teachers in Northern Sri Lanka perceived that integration of computer technologies will enhance the quality of their teaching. However, they faced many challenges in the implementation of computer integrated teaching. Therefore, this study suggests that relevant authorities should take responsibility to provide computer training and integrate computer-based teaching-learning activities into the school syllabus, and at the same time teachers in the Northern Sri Lanka also need to realize the important of the computer integrated teaching to address the needs of the learners in the technology era.

Key words: Assessment, Continuous Assessment Mechanism, Post Graduate Diploma in Education, Continuous Assessment Test and Open and Distance Learning.

Introduction

The Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme is one of the most popular and highly demanding programme offered by the Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka for graduate teachers to develop their professional skills and competencies while they are in the teaching service. Annually the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme is conducted at nearly 09 regional and 18 study centres in all three mediums namely Sinhala, Tamil and English. More than 3500 student teachers enrol for this programme every academic year. Take home assignments and activity-based assignment in day schools are considered as the main methods of Continuous Assessment (CA) of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme. Take home assignments are set and moderated by senior academics in the department. They follow the course team concept adapted by the Faculty of Education when they set and moderate each assignment. All the take home assignments are prepared according to the guidelines and common format accepted by the department. One of the main condition expected by the particular course team is to provide practical outlook and research-based approach with the theoretical perspective through the take home assignments. Therefore, practical and research-based component has been

included into the assignment as a part of the assignment. For instance, to answer the assignment questions student teachers are expected to visit schools or other relevant educational institution to collect data and information (by using small questioners, interview relevant persons, observing particular things or situations, etc.). Based on that data, student teachers can complete the relevant part of the assignment.

Activity based assignments are conducted as interactive sessions in day schools for all the courses at every regional and study centres. The main objective of conducting activity-based assignment is to improve student teachers' presentation skills, leadership skills and collaborative learning skills, etc. Relevant learning sessions and main themes for each activity-based assignment are given to the student teachers at the inaugural session of the programme. Student teachers are expected to participate in the activity-based assignment day schools with prior preparation.

Accordingly, the faculty staff have been spending a considerable time on discussing possible interventions to improve the quality of the CA component. As a result, some procedures such as participatory approach to set and finalize the assignments, conducting training programmes annually for marking examiners, decentralizing the marking of assignments under the monitoring of assignment coordinators and activity-based assignment for each course were introduced. In 2015, the department of Secondary and Tertiary Education decided to introduce another change to the assessment mechanism of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme. Continuous Assessment Test (CAT) was introduced instead of one home taken assignment for all courses of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme from the 2015/2016 academic year. CAT was conducted at every regional and study centres at the same date and time. Under the Continuous Assessment Test student teachers have to sit for a 1 ½ hour paper for each course of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme. The department has followed more confidential mechanism to mark student teachers CAT answer scripts. Therefore, the department has taken a decision to mark CAT answer scripts via special panel marking process under the supervision of panel chief at each regional and study centre.

All continuous assessments marks are very important for student teachers to sit for the final evaluation of the programme. Accordingly, 40% of the Overall Continuous Assessment Mark (OCAM) is considered for the calculation of the final evaluation marks. After the introduction of CAT to the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme no extensive study was carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of the new mode of assessment. Therefore, the present exploratory study was conducted to identify the strengths and limitations of the new intervention and to make suggestions for further improvement of the CA mechanism.

Literature Review

Continuous Assessment in Open and Distance Learning

The success of the Open and Distance Learning basically depends on the total quality management and best practices for the quality enhancement of curriculum, programme delivery mechanism, continuous assessment practices and student support services provided by the institution. Continuous Assessment is playing a significant role in the Open and Distance Learning system. It is playing a multitask activity unlike in the conventional system. Different types of practices are adopted to assess students' performance. Open and Distance Learning institutions follow diversified approaches to assessing performance of the students. The components of assessment in Open and Distance Learning systems should never be separated from students' learning experiences (Nayak, n.d). He further emphasized that many of the assessment practices following by the Open and Distance Learning institutions, giving more important to assess content knowledge rather than skill development and practical applications. Therefore, sometimes the methods of continuous assessments adopted by the Open and Distance Learning institutions fail to assess learner's level of meta-cognition, creativity and other higher order cognitive skills, which are very important to cope with the world of work as well as it is essential for personal and professional growth. But in the Open and Distance Learning system, the main constrain is that students are not having enough face-to-face interaction with teachers. Therefore, from learners' point of view the assessment is a challenging task in Open and Distance Learning system. The main issues are credibility and reliability of assessment procedure. Makamane (2011) pointed out that validity, reliability and fairness are essentials to maintain the quality of the assessment procedure. To enhance the effectiveness of the assessment

procedures time to time higher education institutions, especially Open and Distance Learning institutions need to adopt innovative approaches in the continuous assessment mechanism.

Innovations in Assessments

Continuous Assessment is an essential component of a teaching-learning process. CA methods and practices can change the learning environment in higher education specially in the Open and Distance Learning environment it is helpful to enhance the learning opportunities and provide the platform to encourage the dialogue between teachers and students at distance. To enhance the effectiveness of the CA component higher education institutions incorporated more and more innovative strategies in to the traditional approaches of the CA component, which places the student at the center of the learning process and requires new pedagogical practices to strengthen professional skills. Therefore, Continuous Assessment becomes a key tool for monitoring, guiding and strengthening current training processes and the quality of higher education. In the present assessment mechanism, there has been a significant movement towards using more and more different assessments methods than traditional assessments methods such as portfolios, activity-based assignments, and other performance-based assessments are higher in both practicality and complications of the tasks evaluated but involve more time to practice and score than the traditional assessments (Gronlund, 2006). He further points out that the assessment is an important element in the teaching-learning process that challenges instructors to consider evaluation techniques that meet the learning needs of today's adult learners. Further Kellaghan and Greaney (2004) also identified several roles of CA such as determine the learner's level of knowledge, skills or understanding, to diagnose problems he or she may be encountering, to make decision about the next instructional steps to take and to evaluate the learning that has been taken in a lesson. According to Mansell (2009) the effectiveness of CA trace significantly to its deliberate use in directing students towards the learning that the system and society expect to attain and that matches their own aptitudes and aspiration. Shepard (2000) highlighted that alternative assessments are more intrinsically motivating than traditional assessments.

Continuous Assessment and Self-Learning Practices

Assessment is a systematic process for gathering data about student achievement. It is an essential component of the teaching-learning processes. There are two different assessments

procedures are followed by the educational institutions such as formative and summative. The roles of the formative and summative assessments are used for different purposes. Generally formative assessments are helpful to improve the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. Summative assessments are helpful to measure students' achievement. Continuous Assessment is pay attention closely to students, observing students as they are engaged in learning, as they are engaged with materials, and trying to understand what they understand. Recent assessment approaches are attempting to increase the correspondence between what students need to learn and what is expected for them to know once they finish their studies (Gulikers, Bastiaens, Kirschner, and Kester, 2006).

McMillan (2000) pointed out that outcome of the assessment is influencing on students' motivation and regulate their motivation towards their learning. Kathleen and McMillan (2010) also mentioned that formative assessment can have a powerful impact on student motivation and achievement. They emphasised that formative assessment helps teachers to gather important information about student understanding, provide feedback to students and enable students to set and attain meaningful learning goals. They further pointed out that each of these techniques can enhance student motivation as well as achievement. Muskin (2017) mentions that CA is a formative tool. It informs feedbacks, remediation, and /or enrichment targeted to a student, a group of students, or a whole class. It may also help to identify the need for specific professional development objectives for a teacher or group of teachers and inspire related steps. He further mentioned that CA is a significant pedagogic tool in the teaching-learning process. Through the CA mechanism teachers and students can employ to check and guide their progress continuously in a constructive way.

Impacts of Continuous Assessment in Adult Learning

Purpose of the Continuous Assessment is promoting students' learning. It is helpful to enhance the effective learning of the adults' learners. In general, adult education in all its forms has typically been non-compulsory. Adult learners can choose whether they want to participate or not, and also in many situations, adults themselves have to pay their attention for their learning. Based on these two factors adult learners can construct their role differently. According to the Theory of Andragogy, adult learners are generally seen as self-motivated, bringing valuable

experience with the potential to enrich the learning situation, and, in some contexts, adult learners have a good relationship with the teachers. Therefore, they like to engage in informal modes of learning, as well as in models of learning radically different to those in formal, institutionalized contexts. These might include notions of learning without teachers, learning collectively, learning ‘for its own sake’, learning without certification and qualifications, learning outside institutions, and learning at any time of the day, night or year (Derrick and Ecclestone, 2006). They further mentioned that a focus on informal, non-institutionalized learning suggests that effective attainment depends on assessment processes that are present in all forms and instances of learning, not just in courses providing credentials for the employment market. These modes of assessment, often integral to the learning process, are basically formative rather than summative in nature.

Challenges of Continuous Assessment

Based on the type of assessment methods and the way the assessments procedures are implemented to assess the students’ level of achievement; the students are facing various challenges to complete the assessments task successfully. A study was done to investigate the implementations and challenges of continuous assessment in selected Public Universities of Eastern Ethiopia, the findings revealed that the implemented continuous assessment type was highly dominated by cognitive. Further this study revealed that the most challenges of continuous assessment were plagiarisms, lack of feedback, large class size, shortage of time, lack of facilities (Abera, Kedir, and Beyabeyin, 2017).

A study conducted by Jayathilake (1997) to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Continuous Assessment System of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme of the Open University of Sri Lanka. The study revealed and recommended the needs of the redefining the objectives of using CA as a method of evaluating student achievement and restructuring the format of assignments. Navaratna and Silva (2013) recommended that it is needed to educate students on how to effectively use CA as a learning tool, especially at the commencement of the program. Various studies (Lekamge and Jayathilake, 2002; Jayathilake, 1997; Lekamge et. al., 2013) had been performed about the CA system of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme of the Open University of Sri Lanka with a purpose to find the strengths and

weakness of the CA system and recommended short term and long term procedures to address the problems and issues recognised. Based on these recommendations from academic year 2015/2016, CAT was introduced as a new CA system to the Post Graduate Diploma in Education Programme.

Objectives of the Study

The present study was carried out in order to find out the strengths and limitations of the new interventions introduced to the CA component. The following specific research objectives were formulated in line with the main objective of the research study.

1. To identify student teachers' perception about the CA methods used in the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme.
2. To identify how far the CAT assessment method, motivate self- learning practices among the Post Graduate Diploma in Education student teachers.
3. To evaluate the challenges faced by the student teachers to complete the CA components of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme.
4. To draw suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the CA mechanism of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme

Research Methodology

The study was conducted on student teachers who have registered for Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme for academic year 2015/2016. These student teachers represent the regional study centres namely Colombo, Kandy, Matara, Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Kurunegala and Badulla.

Research Design

Quantitative research approaches and qualitative research approaches were used in this study within a framework of a survey research design.

Population and Sample

The population for the study constitutes student teachers (3200) who have registered for the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme for 2015/2016 academic year. Six hundred (600)

student teachers were selected as the sample. The questionnaire survey was distributed among the student teachers who were physically present in the selected study centres at the time of the side visit for data collection. Three hundred and twenty-four (324) student teachers responded to this study. The table one is indicating the Regional Centre wise representation of the respondents.

Table 1: Distribution of the Sample

Centre	No. of Questionnaires Distributed (All 3 Medium)			Total	No. of completed questionnaires returned (All 3 Medium)			Total	%
	Sinhala	Tamil	English		Sinhala	Tamil	English		
Colombo	40	40	40	120	19	21	22	62	19.1
Kandy	40	40	-	80	23	24	-	47	14.5
Matara	40	-	-	40	23	-	-	23	07.1
Anuradhapura	40	25	-	65	21	12	-	33	10.2
Batticaloa	40	40	-	80	26	25	-	51	15.8
Jaffna	40	40	-	80	21	22	-	43	13.3
Kurunegala	40	40	-	80	19	20	-	39	12.0
Badulla	30	25	-	55	12	14	-	26	08.0
Total	310	250	40	600	164	138	22	324	54.0

Methods Used for Data Collection and Data Analysis

The development of data collection instrument was done by the research team members using a collaborative approach. Data collection instrument was piloted with a small number of participants and revised on the basis of their responses before using them on a large scale. The members of the research team were involved in the administration of instrument in this study. The data collection instrument was questionnaire. The questionnaire was structured type and focused on collecting data on four identified key areas:

- (1) Perception of student teachers about the three type of CA methods,
- (2) How far CAT assessment method motivates self- learning practices,
- (3) Challenges faced by the student teachers to complete the three types of CA component, and
- (4) Suggestions to improve the CAT component.

There were four main items in the whole questionnaire, and the number of questions in each key area varied. Also, under some of the main items several sub items were included to get a broader

understanding on the aspects related to the main items. Rating scales, structured type questions and few open-ended questions were among those sub items.

Simple statistical methods such as frequencies and percentages were used to analyse data collected through questionnaire and qualitative methods such as categorical analyses and content analysis were used to analyse data arise from the open ended questions.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented in this section in line with the research objectives of the study.

Student Teachers' Perceptions on CA Methods

Majority of student teachers (98%) mentioned that they have received the relevant documents such as printed modules, assignment book, instructions and guidelines to complete the activities pertaining to CA component without any delay and they accepted that continuous assessment mechanism helped to motivate them to learn at distance mode as an adult learner. Most of the student teachers believed that CA component helped them to face final examination more confidently. Majority of the student teachers (89%) mentioned that CAT and take home assignments increased their motivation for self-study than activity based assignment. All the respondents expressed their views on how far these three CA methods increased their self-motivation as distance learners and their views are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Students teachers' views on CA methods

CA Methods	Student Teachers Views
Take home assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivate to refer modules and extra reading materials. • Part II of the take home assignments increased our involvement to identify actual situations of the classroom and school settings. • It is motivated to explore new and updated information • Part II of the take home assignment questions are like a research based activities, these activities helped to improve our research skills
Continuous Assessment Test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We thought.... compare to take home assignments, we can easily prepare our self for CAT exam and finish our task straightforwardly. But after the CAT exams, we realise.... writing answers for short and structured type questions.... we need to study carefully and clearly. • Prior notice of relevant sessions helped me to prepare for the test. • CAT exam has increased our interest to refer relevant study sessions of the particular module...but the majority of the questions are try to evaluate our cognitive ability related to the course content.
Activity based assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage to read modules and increase our active participation to carry out the activities. • Increased our presentation and leadership skills • It is help to do a collaborative learning • It helped to share our knowledge with others. • It provided practical approach into the theory we learned and opportunities to apply theory into practice. • Group works increased our enthusiasm. • Instructional structure of the activity-based assignment helped us to earn individual marks as well as marks for group work.

All the respondents were asked to express their level of consent with reference to the CAT using five-point Likert scale: (5) Strongly agree (4) Agree (3) Neither agree or disagree (2) Disagree (1) Strongly disagree.

Table 3: Student Teachers Consent on CAT

Statements	5		4		3		2		1	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
The knowledge instructed through the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme is sufficient to face the CAT examination successfully.	78	24	224	69	23	07	-	-	-	-
Time Allocation for CAT examinations is sufficient	58	18	259	80	-	-	03	01	03	01
Clear instructions are given for completion of the CAT.	91	28	217	67	-	-	06	02	10	03
CATs provide sufficient opportunities to relate theory with practice.	65	20	211	65	06	02	19	06	23	07
It is more useful to inform the study sessions in advance which is going to be evaluated under the CAT.	275	85	49	15	-	-	-	-	-	-
The structure of the CAT papers is more helpful to construct and organize the answers.	55	17	217	67	06	02	19	06	32	10
Clear and simple language has been used in the CAT papers.	65	20	211	65	06	02	19	06	23	07
A supportive atmosphere was maintained by the supervisors at the CAT examination centres.	32	10	211	65	16	05	26	08	39	12
Sufficient infrastructure facilities are provided to carry out the CAT examinations.	42	13	185	57	19	06	32	10	32	10
CAT examinations are more useful than Take Home assignments.	233	72	58	18	-	-	23	07	10	03
As adult learner CAT examinations are helpful to manage my available time than written assignments.	52	16	224	69	10	03	16	05	23	07
CAT examinations make me to learn in depth than written assignments.	36	11	181	56	19	06	49	15	39	12
Grades received for the CAT examinations are sufficient for my attempt.	81	25	175	54	-	-	29	09	39	12
The feedbacks given for me after the CAT examination are more useful.	16	5	68	21	23	07	12 3	38	94	29
CAT examinations are increasing our motivation for continuous learning.	55	17	191	59	10	03	32	10	36	11

As indicated in Table 3 the findings revealed that the highest number of the student teachers perceived the CAT method positively. The majority of the student teachers expressed that, CAT examinations are more useful (72%) than take home assignments. Because they may feel that for the research-based assignment they need to spend more time to observe the classroom settings. It is noted that most of the student teachers disagree (38%) or strongly disagree (29%) with the usefulness of the feedback given for the CAT. This indicates that feedbacks given to student teachers for their performance in CAT exams are inadequate.

Open ended questions in the questionnaire allowed the student teachers to indicate the challenges faced by them to involve in each of the CA component.

Table 4: The Challenges Faced by the Student Teachers to Complete the CA Component

CA methods	Problems faced by the student teachers
Take home assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties on organising relevant answers in a logical way and some sessions relevant to the assignment are not covered in the day schools. • Facing difficulties to understand some specific problems given in the assignment. Specially questions asked in the part II take home assignment. • Spend long time to complete the part II assignments of the all the courses. Need to spend more time to collect data. • Delay in receiving marked assignments and also the comments given to the assignments are sometimes not much with the grade received for that particular assignments. • As adult learners faced some personal family related problems and the workload carried out in the schools. Therefore, writing and submitting assignments before the due dates is created stress in our mind sometimes. • Difficulties to collect some data and information from some particular persons like Principals, Institutional Heads.... and sometimes from students also. • Some sessions relevant to the assignment is covered through the day school after the submission of the particular assignment.
Continuous Assessment Test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time allocation is not sufficient... specially for ESP2103 -measurements and evaluation. • Knowledge gained from the day schools are not enough to face the CAT... as distance learners we are not get the opportunities to learn from the central campus academics. • Difficulties in organising short and structured answers... the majority of the CAT questions are very specific questions...faced difficulties to write the very specific answers. • Some CAT marks are not received on time. • No enough feedback for CAT.
Activity Based Assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient time is not allocated for group activities. • Not receiving opportunity to do some presentations.

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|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some of the group members do not contribute. |
|--|--|

Suggestions to Improve the Effectiveness of the CA Mechanism

The following suggestions were proposed by the student teachers to improve the CAT method.

- Results of the CAT examinations should be informed before the next CAT.
- Enough time need to be allocated for CAT.
- Timely feedback should be given.
- It is good to give the answers of the CAT.
- It is preferred to receive the marked CAT papers.
- It is very useful to cover the relevant sessions through day schools before the CAT.
- Reduce the time gap for giving CAT marks.
- Allocate separate time or session to discuss each CAT papers.
- Include few multiple-choice questions into the CAT paper.

According to the analysis of Table 4 and the suggestions given by the student teachers, it is clearly showed the difficulties faced by them to get the maximum benefits from the CA mechanism. They clearly showed in a various way about their willingness to get the feedback for their CAT examination answer scripts on time and also before the next CAT examination they are expecting their completed CAT examination results, and also they expressed the time allocated for the CAT was not sufficient. The department has to consider the student teachers' suggestions to improve their satisfaction related to the CA mechanism in a positive way.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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

The analysis appears to suggest that to increase the effectiveness of the CAT method, the Department of Secondary and Tertiary education of the Faculty of Education need to consider the following recommendations;

1. Grade received by student teachers for the CAT examinations should be informed as early as possible.
2. Establish proper mechanism to give feedback to the student teachers in relation to the CAT answer scripts.
3. Improve the monitoring mechanism with regard to the CA component more efficiently and effectively.
4. Include few multiple-choice questions into the CAT papers.

Overall, the study revealed that the new mode of assessment introduced to the CA mechanism of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme is positively perceived by the student teachers.

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