

# LEADERS' READINESS TO ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE: EMPOWERING REGIONAL EDUCATION LEADERS THROUGH ODL SYSTEMS IN SRI LANKA

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## Introduction

Master of Arts in Teacher Education–International (MATE-I) programme is a practitioner-oriented professional development programme, conducted by the Department of Second and Tertiary Education of the Faculty of Education. It has been specially designed for teacher educators with the aim of improving the teaching learning process at classroom level. This is the only programme offered by a University in Sri Lanka in this nature. Among the number of salient features inherent to the programme, offering it in open and distance learning mode is prominent.

Teacher educator services was established in 1999 incorporating all segments in related services in education. They are the fore-runners in education who are responsible mainly for pre-service training of teachers. In addition to that, their contribution at implementation in monitoring the classroom practices is immeasurable. However, training programmes available for teacher educators, as well as for any other professional in the field of education, were course based and traditional, and was in need to be changed urgently. Taking that into account, MATE (I) which is unique in its pedagogical design was introduced by the Faculty of Education. All six courses of the programme have been developed scenario based, to reflect the kinds of situations that the students are very likely to confront as teacher educators.

This study attempted to understand whether the roles and expectations of participants, teacher educators who are responsible for the development of education at regional level, can be complemented with the objectives and procedures of the MATE (I) programme.

## Background

With the establishment of the Open University of Sri Lanka in the national university system in 1980, it has broadened the opportunities even for those otherwise would have been the drop outs from the path of learning forever (Gonsalkorale, 2016, p.106). Being one of the well-recognized national universities, where students are able to pursue further education through distance education mode, OUSL awards the degrees of the same level awarded by the other national universities, and coming under the purview of the University Grants Commission. As any other university it does not have any exception of its contribution to the national development, in the sense,

The Universities are of vital importance in the development of a modern nation. The quality of our health, teaching, banking and administrative services are considerably dependent on the caliber of the graduates produced by our Universities, who also dominate the professions. Hence, While keeping pace with current developments in the realm of knowledge and being alive to contemporary situations and requirements the universities should be participants in the developmental process. (Warnapala, 2009, p.22).

Open and Distance Education (ODL) is unique because it is firmly entrenched in openness to remove all barriers to learning research and scholarship. OUSL's vision is to excellence, equity and efficiently inexorably relevant to meet future challenges (Vidanapathirana, 2010). Further, pointing Keegan (1993), Gonsalkorale (2016) differentiates the conventional education and distance education. According to him, in the organization of distance education, same learning happens in the absence of interaction between the teacher and the learner (p.17/18).

The nature of the MATE (I) programme, in which the 'professional training is very close to work, both in content and in pattern of organization, 'brings forward a need for closer links between educational institutions [...] both to match [...] demands and to keep teachers in touch with development outside schools and universities (Tait, 1992, p.85). This nature, where the learners need to learn with the practical issues in their own context, with a minimum interaction with their teachers, is well suited with the nature of distance education.

This programme, which was developed with the support of Commonwealth of Learning, launched in the year 2000, to meet the unmet demands in teacher education as identified by the National Education Commission of Sri Lanka (OUSL, 2004). With its' aims and objectives, the programme intends to make the regional leaders to accept context based challenges, and , to sharpen their leadership skills as an integral part of their day to day activities, as;

Leadership is an integral part of management and place a vital role in managerial operations. If there is any single factor that differentiate between successful and unsuccessful organizations, it could be considered as dynamic and affective leadership (Drucker, 1954, p.95)

Further, in the current context, regional leaders are encouraged to create utilize maximum the capabilities of their subordinates. In that context;

Leadership may be defined as the art of influencing and inspiring subordinates to perform their duties willingly, competently and enthusiastically for the achievement of group objectives. Most management writers agree that leadership is the process of influencing the objectives of an individual or group in efforts towards goal achievement in a given situation (Hersey & Kenn, 1982, p.82)

In this endeavor, it is very vital to inquire the expectations of the regional education leaders at the beginning, who enroll to follow this programme, and to evaluate their readiness to commence the activities of the programme, where;

The learner is not regarded as a mere subject of certain operations to whom things are made to happen but he is a producer of forces and currents which he will be able to command and shape as per his initiative and desire. He is considered a self-directed, active agent making choices, taking decisions, directing the process quantitatively, and qualitatively, and taking responsibility for all this (Gandhi, 2009, p.15)

### **Objectives**

In such a context, it is expected, in this study;

1. To identify their expectations of following MATE (I) programme.
2. To identify how the programme should be managed to fulfill their expectations.

### **Methodology**

The number of students enrolled for the programme is very limited for a manageable number of teacher educators. Therefore, the total number of students registered for the programme, the actual population, was considered as the sample of the study. Participants are coming all over the country, in all three media- Sinhala (40), Tamil (20) and English (10), from various academic and administrative background, such as Directors of Education, Lecturers in Universities and Colleges of Education, Heads in Schools and In-service Advisors. Direct personal interviews (Gupta, 1999, p.135) were conducted as the major data collection methodology. A semi-structured Interview schedule covering broader aspects of their expectations was used. Focus group discussions were also conducted with various professional groups, followed by the interviews to get a general view of their expectations, and further to confirm data gathered through interviews. In addition to that, participants were asked to write whatever they believe in this regard freely. Data gathered through all these methods were mainly about their experiences and interactions in natural settings (Koul, 1997, p.187), and those were analyzed qualitatively, and quantitatively wherever necessary, to identify general and specific views.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

A simple majority of the sample is aware of the open and distance mode of learning, and has decided to join the programme with the knowledge of challenges faced by an open and distance learner. Most of the responses are very traditional and, among those: to get the knowledge updated (65%), to get the qualification increased (89%), to get a professional qualification related to teacher education (54%), to get a better job (59%), to get personal skills improved (51%), to face administrative issues successfully (51%) are common.

However, some of their views are very encouraging such as: to guide and monitor classroom teachers for successful outcomes (37%), to be developed in a modern conceptual framework (26%), to get a training in an authentic situation (11%), to get the capacity improved by a quality postgraduate qualification (10%), . In addition to that around 74% of the participants have ever heard about the programme from someone else, who have followed the programme and, had an idea of the quality of the programme.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

In the light of gathered information from the participants, it can be concluded that, even though the majority says that they know about the ODL and this particular programme, they are still with conventional expectations of the output. As almost all of them start learning in ODL methodology with this programme, they expect frequent support and guidance, as was in their traditional learning.

Researchers in this study recommend;

1. To conduct an awareness programme on ODL methodology prior to the MATE (I) programme.
2. To appoint academic counselors for the benefit of learners so that they are able to contact whenever come across difficulties related to open distance learning.

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