Technology usage for teaching law in open and distance learning: a Sri Lankan perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only institution to deliver legal education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Sri Lanka. This study aims to analyze technology usage in learning and teaching law in the ODL under OUSL to evaluate the accessibility and also challenges.

Design/methodology/approach – A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies has been used for the study. This includes both interviews with teachers and surveying among students on the usage of technology in learning and teaching law at OUSL. Since the LL.B Degree Programme of OUSL delivered at six regional centres in Sri Lanka, this study also includes the comparative analysis of technology usage in teaching and learning at selected regional centres.

Findings – The findings indicate that the majority of students have access to technology through mobile phones and are aware of blended learning. Even though they prefer to integrate blended learning with learning law, they do not prefer learning entirely online. Social media and mobile applications are the most preferred modes of blended learning by students. It is also acknowledged that the internal staff has knowledge and access to the use of technology in teaching law while the external staff faces challenges and is in need of adequate training.

Originality/value – The original contribution of this article provides insightful guidelines not only to the OUSL of Sri Lanka but also to the institutions offering similar disciplines through ODL to understand lecturers, learners in the future integration of technology.

Keywords Online learning, Open and distance education (ODE), Technology-mediated teaching, Technology usage, Law, Sri Lanka

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Technology is a vital factor in the contemporary world. It has been a game player benefiting almost every activity. Education is no different. The use of technology in education has taken forward both learning and teaching to the next level. Learning and teaching through open and distance learning (ODL) entails innovative methods that have been transformed by the integration of technology in education. Being a pioneer in providing education through ODL in Sri Lanka, the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) also pays attention to enhancing the usage of technology among its future goals. Proposed goals of OUSL to be met by 2020 include: improvement of ODL infrastructure facilities in the campus/regional centers, provide learner support equipment in the university, regional and study centres. It aims at making ICT/language/soft skills output of the curriculum, providing compulsory ICT/language/soft skills/ODL training for undergraduates, and providing academic staff training facilities to...
develop skills on ODL and ICT locally and globally (Strategic Management Plan 2015-2020, The OUSL). Advanced technology usage, including online learning, was first introduced at OUSL in 2003 with the training provided by the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia. In continuation, designing, delivering, and monitoring of OUSL online courses were launched in 2008 (Jayatilleke, 2010). Today, OUSL has successfully undergone the transition of delivering ODL using technology. Against this background, this study aims to understand the accessibility and challenges in the usage of technology in teaching and learning law in the OUSL. For a sustainable delivery of education in ODL, continuous transitions are required. Such attempts for transitions should always consider the stakeholders involved in its success. Thus, for shaping the delivery of law in ODL in contemporary times, it is a must to learn the usage of technology among learners and teachers. This exercise will be a learning opportunity for the future revisions on curriculum and course delivery of law in the OUSL.

The article is divided into five sections. The first part starts with a literature review with a brief exploration of teaching and learning law within the ODL framework and technology usage in legal education. In the second section, research methodology is examined and explained. In the third section, the results gathered through the research methodology are discussed. The last section offers some concluding remarks with recommendations for future course delivery practices.

**Objective of the study**
The objective of this article is to review the extent to which technology is used in learning and teaching law by the teachers and students of the LL.B degree programme in the context of present opportunities and challenges. It outlines suggestions to enhance the better delivery with the integration of technology.

**Research questions**

*RQ1.* To what extent do the students and teachers have access to technology?

*RQ2.* Do students and teachers use technology in the present for their learning and teaching?

*RQ3.* What is the perception of students and teachers in linking the usage of technology with the delivery of the LL.B Degree programme?

**Literature review**

*Legal education in open and distance learning*
UNESCO's movement for education for all (UNESCO, 2001, 2015) is an initiative that ensures that ODL provides the right to education for all irrespective of age, ethnicity, gender, and social status. This clearly indicates the significance of ODL as one of the most rapidly growing delivery mode of education today. It focuses on open access to education by offering flexible learning opportunities to learners (UNESCO, 2002). Open distance learning is a combination of open learning and distance learning. Open learning implies open to entry, qualification, technology, pedagogy, and curriculum. On the other hand, distance learning indicates learning and teaching processes separated between the teacher and the student and not constrained by time, pace, and place. The primary purpose of ODL is to establish equity in access to education through various modes of education. Thus, the ODL is also called as “Independent Learning,” “Flexible learning,” as well as “Self-learning” (Ritimoni Bordoloi, 2018). The development of teaching and learning in ODL is subjected to incorporating novel concepts. The new concept of ODL is growing fast because of the development of Internet-based information technologies and in particular, the World Wide Web (Ghosh et al., 2012). It
is to be understood that the usage of technology is an emerging trend in shaping learning and teaching. Hence the ODL is shifting to e-learning and teaching. This ensures the very fundamental concept of ODL; student-centered learning. In many countries, institutions offering ODL are adopting technology usage to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The idea of an Open University emerged as a way to provide ODL and was first established in 1969 by the United Kingdom. Following this, the concept was adopted across the world. Korean National Open University; Sokuthai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand; Open Universiteit, Netherlands; National Open University, Nigeria; Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia; Indira Gandhi Open University, India; Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan; OUSL; National Open University of Taiwan; British Columbia Open University, Canada; Bangladesh Open University; and Open University, Malaysia are examples. Legal education is the most demanded and prominent programme offered by the majority of these Open Universities. This has immensely contributed to the change in traditional delivery of legal education and revolutionized the delivery of law programmes.

The OUSL is the only national university to offer law in ODL in Sri Lanka. This university was established in 1978 under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978. The OUSL is one of the 15 national universities which has the same legal presence as any other national university in Sri Lanka. Today, more than 40,000 students are studying at the OUSL, including eight Regional Centers and 18 Study Centers located around the country. The central campus is the Colombo Regional Center (CRC). The other eight Regional Centers are situated in Kandy (KRC), Matara (MRC), Jaffna (JRC), Anuradhapura (ARC), Badulla (Badulla RC), Kurunegala (Kurunegala RC), Batticaloa (BRC), and Rathnapura (RRC).

The LL.B degree programme is a 4-year Degree Programme offered by the Department of Legal Studies (DLS) of OUSL. It is one of the first programmes of study offered by the OUSL along with Certificates in Pre-School Education, in Entrepreneurship, and Professional English and the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (G.I.C. Gunawardena and G.D. Lekamge, 2010). It provides the only opportunity to learn law through ODL mode in Sri Lanka. This programme provides the academic qualification and the entry qualification to sit for the exams at Sri Lanka Law College in order to become an attorney at law. It is offered in Sinhala, Tamil, and English mediums. As of now, there are more than 4,000 students pursuing law at the main campus and six regional centers, namely, KRC, MRC, JRC, ARC, BRC, Badulla RC, Kurunegala RC, and RRC.

Technology usage in legal education through open and distance learning.

From the 1980s, ODL has faced immense growth throughout the world with the effect of technological advancements, and its outlook has rapidly changed from comprising primarily print-based materials to becoming technology-oriented (Gunawardena and Melsaac 2003) Since the nature of ODL requires the education providers to make students pursue education in the absence of teachers, continuous revision and renewal are needed. Scholars working on ODL point out that it is shifting from traditional distance learning to e-learning worldwide. The reason is that the teaching and teacher-centered approach supported by old instructional technologies and media needs to be replaced by a learner-centered approach supported by online learning pedagogy and technologies (K.A.J.M. Kuruppuarachchi and K.O.L.C. Karumanayake, 2017). Garrison (1985) categorizes the technological evolution of ODL under three generations: Correspondence, Telecommunications, and Computer. Similarly, Simon et al. (2011) made a similar categorization; Mass media, Conferencing, and Web 2.0. To arrive at the standard criteria of these categorizations, scholars have given importance to the type of interaction and role of the participants. Furthermore, to forecast the future of distance learning, it is crucial to consider “integrated telecommunication systems rather than simply video versus audio, versus data systems” (Aydemira et al., 2015). Taylor (Taylor, 1999) proposed five generations of distance
education. They include: The Correspondence Model based on print technology mostly – the First Generation; The Multi-Media Model based on print, audio, and video technologies and some computer-based courseware – the Second Generation; The Tele-learning Model based on applications of telecommunication technologies to provide opportunities for synchronous communication – the Third Generation; The Flexible Learning Model based on online delivery via the Internet – the Fourth Generation; and The Intelligent Flexible Learning Model which aims to capitalize on the fastness of the Internet and the Web – the Fifth Generation. According to Taylor’s guidelines, the OUSL falls in the Second Generation (Gunawardena and Lekamge, 2010). Today, OUSL adopts the fourth generation successfully with required equipment and infrastructure, enabling the student-centered flexible learning through the use of technology in ODL. Programmes offered at OUSL, including the LL.B degree programme, ensure the academic delivery via the elements of the fourth generation: multi-media, computer-mediated communication provided by connection to the internet, and web-based instructions. It is also evident from the policy framework of OUSL that it aims to achieve the fifth generation in distance learning by connecting the teachers and students on the best interactive platform. Initiatives of providing wi-fi access to students at public spaces and library of the university and enabling the learning experience of OUSL at social media platforms are examples.

The policy framework of OUSL also emphasizes that the educational instruments of ODL focus on the optimization of contact hours between students and teachers. This is achieved by a balance of educational technologies such as learner-friendly printed texts, audio-visual programmes, web-based resources, a limited number of day schools, and a continuous assessment system used for teaching-learning, monitoring, and feedback (Strategic Management Plan 2015-2020, The OUSL). Even though the predominant delivery medium of the university is print, audio–video material appreciating the benefits of technology usage is supplemented. The responsibility of facilitating self-learning of students who are often isolated rests with Learner Support Service (LSS). In order to ensure that both teachers and learners of OUSL understand the usage of technology in the process of OUSL initiatives have been taken by the university. Students are educated during the time of orientation, and the newly recruited permanent academic staff are trained by the Staff Development Centre (SDC) during their teachers’ training programme. The training of teachers includes updating the staff about using new emerging technologies into teaching. In addition to this, SDC and CETM of OUSL conduct workshops frequently to update the teachers about the technologies that could be integrated into the delivery of education.

Legal education is one of the oldest and noble field. It cannot merely rely on its traditional way of teaching and learning. It should be developed according to the challenges of this century. Hence, technology usage is integrated with the delivery and consumption of legal education. It is the practical use of knowledge, particularly in a specific area, and is a way of doing a task, especially using technical processes, methods, or knowledge defined as technology usage (Isman, 2012). Technology usage in legal education may include software such as multimedia courseware, web-based resources; communication tools such as voice chat, textual discussion forums, or video conferencing; mind tools (such as concept mapping tools and multimedia authoring tools); or any other possible ICT tools that is, electronic law books, e-journals on law, electronic legal databases with bare acts, judgements, and articles (Mewcha Anha Gebremedhin and Ayele Almaw Fenta, 2015).

Furthermore, legal education involves developing the critical knowledge and critical skills of students. Means of technology usage such as audio–video aids to present practical legal problems can motivate and challenge students to enhance their analytical and problem-solving skills. Similarly, it also offers excellent opportunities for teachers to enhance their teaching of law in course development and academic delivery, that is, subjects such as criminal law and land law, which are involved in practical issues can be discussed with the usage of video films. The DLS delivers LL.B Degree Programme through printed modules, face-to-face contact
sessions, and technology usage. DLS adopts blended learning as its technology usage. This includes Moodle, supplementary audio–video lessons. Course development and academic delivery are conducted by the staff of the department along with the external resource persons.

Methodology
This study adopts both qualitative and quantitative methods. For the quantitative method, a survey was used to determine the extent to which technology is used in learning law by LL.B students. For the qualitative method, interviews were conducted amongst teachers to understand the usage of e-technology in teaching the LL.B Degree Programme.

Research design and sample
Level V students (third year) and teachers were selected as the research sample to conduct this study. The questionnaire was sent to students of CRC, KRC, MRC, and JRC who had registered for Level V in the year 2019. Students promoted to Level V after completing the Level III and IV subjects, have four subjects to cover in Level V; that is, Environmental Law, International Law, Administrative Law, and Land Law. Of these, two subjects have compulsory components of assignments to successfully pass the Level V. They are the group project of Environmental law and Oral presentation of Land law. Hence, Level V students are considered to be tested to understand the usage of technology. There are 500–550 students registered for each subject in Level V. Among the total population of students, the study was conducted in Colombo RC (190–200) and other RCs; KRC (70–80), JRC (40–45), and MRC (90–105). Among the total population, the target population was selected based on a large number of students registered in each medium.

Population
The population consisted of 310 registered students and 8 lecturers of the LL.B Degree programme in CRC and selected RCs: KRC, MRC, and JRC. The student population would be able to address the research questions as they had 2 years of experience in learning the law, and the current year requires them to face two compulsory components in two subjects, which have elements of technology.

Data-collection instruments
To understand the usage of technology in learning law, an analysis has been conducted based on the data extracted from the questionnaire. Furthermore, to understand the usage of technology in teaching law, a descriptive research methodology has been used by interviewing the internal and external teachers in person and over the phone.

Questionnaire
The questionnaire was circulated to Level V students from selected RCs. The questionnaire had ten MCQs to meet the objectives of this study.

Interview
Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone with teachers teaching in each media from selected RCs in Level V; three from CRC, three from KRC, one from MRC and JRC each. This includes internal and external teachers.

Data analysis
The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using the SPSS package, and the finding is explained in the discussion using tables and charts. The data gathered through interviews are reported in the second part of the discussion descriptively.
Limitation of the study
It could have been better if the study was focused on all the students and teachers of the LLB Degree Programme of OUSL to have a clearer understanding of usage of e technology by students and teachers in learning and teaching law. However, this research only focuses on teachers and students from selected regional centers in Level V.

Discussion
This part will be a combination of discussion on technology usage in learning law and technology usage in teaching law in OUSL.

Technology usage in learning law in OUSL
This chapter analyses and discusses the significant findings of the research based on the data collected through a questionnaire.

Response rate. The questionnaire was distributed to 310 students from four selected regional centers; 192 from CRC and 220 from selected RCs. In total, 166 responses were received. These comprised 93 responses from CRC (56 per cent) and 73 responses from other selected RCs (44 per cent).

Participant demographics. Among the total population of respondents, 52 per cent are female, and 47 per cent are male. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents belong to the age category of 29–39 (47 per cent). Others: 18–28 (34 per cent), above 40 (19 per cent). Respondents represented all three mediums, respectively: Sinhala, 62 per cent; Tamil, 25 per cent; and English, 13 per cent.

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Access to technology
The results indicated that 64 per cent of students use mobile phones to access technology. Others use the following to access technology: laptop, 24 per cent; desktop, 8 per cent; and tablet, 4 per cent. It shows that 100 per cent of the students have access to technology through one of the above-mentioned means (refer to Figure 1).

Majority of them have accessed technology through their mobile data (95 per cent). Among the others, 3 per cent had access through the internet facility available at the workplace, and 2 per cent accessed the internet facility provided at OUSL. This indicates that students have regular access to technology (refer to Figure 2).

These results show the vital role played by mobiles in learning law through technology. Several remarks of students show that they download the relevant reading from Moodle and share these with colleagues through social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups. This indicates that the mode of access to technology of the majority is through the mobile; there is a preference for mobile-friendly study sources. Currently, all the technology platforms of OUSL are available to browse through the website. Hence, these platforms should be made available as mobile applications to ensure speedy access. Today, mobile learning is considered an educational avenue that can quickly transform education, knowledge, and information at a cheaper cost. The OUSL of Sri Lanka can use mobile learning in a significant way to strengthen the usage of technology in learning law in ODL.
Use of blended learning

Currently, technology is used by the Department of Legal Studies to teach and learn law through blended learning. LSD offers 17 Moodle platforms for its 17 subjects of the LLB Degree Programme in addition to the print materials and a limited number of face-to-face interaction lectures. Today use of technology is predominantly as “blended learning,” which is a combination of the use of traditional learning with e-learning. Scholars point out that blended learning can increase active learning in strategies, shift the style of learning to be more student-centered and also increase access and flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and facilitate peer learning (Graham et al., 2005; Adams et al., 2014). It is also to be noted that...
blended learning can be applied significantly to both on-campus and off-campus or distance programmes. Blended learning programmes allow students to undertake part of their learning activities online, reducing the time that is required to attend face-to-face lectures (Jagannathan, 2006.)

Moodle platform of DLS is operated and maintained by the assigned internal teachers to motivate and guide students on the study resources and provide an opportunity to interact with teachers and peers. When students were questioned about their experience with Moodle, 65 per cent responded that they had access to Moodle in addition to print materials. A total of 35 per cent responded that they had never accessed Moodle but had accessed other substitute platforms such as; Gmail, Facebook, and WhatsApp groups.

Among the students who access Moodle, the frequency of access is as follows; 24 per cent once in a week, 22 per cent once in a month, and 26 per cent access of Moodle before every written examination. Out of the total students, 28 per cent responded for occasional login (refer to Figure 3).

These results reflect student preference for blended learning. However, modes opted to deliver blended learning could be increased in addition to Moodle. The usage of social media should be noted for its gaining popularity in ODL (refer to Figure 4).

Preference in integrating technology in learning law
Integrating technology into teaching and learning has gained significance. Technology integration is defined in terms of how teachers use technology to perform everyday activities more effectively and how this usage can re-shape these activities (Pourhosein Gilakjani 2017). When students were questioned about their preference to connect technology with learning law, the response rate indicated (Figure 5) that the majority of them preferred blended learning (66 per cent) while 21 per cent preferred fully online learning. Meanwhile, on replacing traditional face-to-face learning by usage of technology 13 per cent of them resist such changes. They are not concerned about the technology usage with learning law but prefer the printed course materials. Some of their remarks show that there is preference to strengthen print materials (refer to Figure 5).

![Moodle Access](image)

*Figure 3.* Moodle access by the students
It should be recognized that 79 per cent of the students have no prior experience of following fully online courses, and only 21 per cent had experienced the exposure of learning entirely online. The prior exposure could be a reason for 21 per cent preferring entirely online learning.

Hence, future developments in the integration of technology with the LL.B Degree Programme should be done upon a need analysis and providing exposure. According to the results obtained so far, it is evident that though the students prefer to use technology in learning law, they do not consider this as substitutes but as supplements (refer to Figure 6).
Technology usage in teaching law

Teachers pool of DLS of OUSL includes both internal and external academic staff. Internal academic staff includes the permanent lecturers of the department attached to CRC, whereas external academic staff includes the visiting academics who deliver lectures at RCs during the weekend. Findings from the interview with selected teachers reveal that both internal and external staff teaching at CRC and selected RCs use technologies for academic delivery. This includes; PowerPoint presentations, videos, e-prints, and supplements at Moodle. They find that it benefits them in improving their delivery, interaction with learners, and sharing of knowledge. Following are some remarkable comments received by the internal teachers:

The knowledge that I received from the CTHE-Teachers training programme and workshops by CETMe has helped me to understand the student-centered learning and enhance the use of Moodle to keep students informed

and,

Though I use Moodle as a platform to share my knowledge and updates with students, they prefer other social media groups such as email, Gmail to interact with me.

When external teachers were asked about the usage of technology in teaching law, their responses include the following remarks:

When the class population is small, we receive small classrooms which have no facility to use PPTs. I rarely get an opportunity to use technology in the classroom provided

and,

I have heard the existence of Moodle, but I have no knowledge and access to it. Hence, I use WhatsApp for small groups. It was such a great handy tool for announcements and simple inquiries and encouragement

Analyzing the interviews with selected internal and external teachers, it is evident that internal lecturers of OUSL find that the usage of technology can improve the interaction as well as collaboration among learners and assist in handling a large number of students from different parts of the island. The internal lecturers use Moodle to educate the students by
supplementing with further reading. The OUSL provides required facilities to acquire relevant knowledge and technologies in doing so. This indicates that permanent teachers in the department are integrating technology in the course they teach through blended learning. Regarding the course development and delivery, there is support service provided by the technical support unit “CETMe.” OUSL is found to be quite self-sufficient in preparing internal teachers for integrating technology with teaching through staff training programmes. Even though the internal teachers have scope and facilities to contribute to the course development and delivery through the use of technology, they point out the overburdened administrative work as a barrier in doing so.

Meanwhile, the majority of the teachers are external staff and have graduated from conventional law schools. Therefore, the usage of technology in the better delivery of law to external staff needs them to be adequately trained. The interviews with external teachers indicate that they have the interest to use their time to integrate technology into the teaching-learning process if the opportunity is provided. It is to be noted that access to Moodle is only given to the internal teachers.

However, both internal and external teachers firmly believe that the usage of instructional technologies makes it easier to prepare course delivery. This indicates that if good and interactive materials are prepared, students can access and easily understand the course. Therefore, practical barriers faced by both the internal and external teachers should be eliminated by the department and the university to attain better delivery to students.

Conclusion
The OUSL is indeed the only platform to continue learning through ODL to those who were denied formal education due to several factors. ODL has the potential to generate new patterns of teaching and learning. The usage of technology is a useful model that can be employed for better delivery of education. However, it should not be a barrier to the learning process. In this context, this study examined the accessibility and challenges of the use of technology in teaching and learning the law in the context of Sri Lankan ODL. The selected group of students and teachers from the DLS of OUSL were used for case studies. The findings indicate that the majority of students have access to technology through mobile phones and are aware of blended learning. Even though they prefer to integrate blended learning with learning law, they do not prefer entirely learning online. It is also acknowledged that the internal staff has knowledge and access to the use of technology in teaching law while external staff faces challenges. The findings of this study reveal that the LLB Degree programme can be delivered efficiently using blended learning including the platforms preferred by the students such as social media and mobile applications. For better delivery, the external staff should be given the opportunity and trained to take part in delivering law with blended learning. Also, the results indicate that significant benefits of using technology for teaching and learning include interaction and student engagement, easy access, content sharing, and communication. The significant challenges faced are the mode of access to technology, affordability, and friendly access. Students recommend including social networking platforms. These research results provide insightful guidelines not only to DSL of OUSL but also to the institutions offering similar disciplines through ODL to understand lecturers, learners in future integration technology with the LLB Degree Programme, and successful implementation in the present. It must be emphasized that the technology usage in ODL should be a bridge, not a barrier.

References


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