International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

ENHANCING HIGHER EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FEASIBILITY OF IMPLEMENTING THE CONNECTED LEARNING MODEL IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2024.7208

ABSTRACT

In today's higher education landscape, integrating technology and innovative pedagogical approaches is essential for enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. This studyinvestigatesthe potential of the Connected Learningmodel within Sri Lanka's public universities. Drawing on digital connectivity, collaboration, and informal learning principles, it explores the feasibility and challenges of its implementation. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and document analysis, this research collects data from administrators, faculty, and students in select public universities. It evaluates the current state of Sri Lankanhigher education, identifies areas for improvement, and assesses the applicability of the Connected Learning model. Additionally, the study examines the technological infrastructure of public universities in Sri Lanka and analyzes pedagogical strategies to seamlessly integrate technology and informal learning into formal education, emphasizing student-centered experiences. Identifying potential adoption obstacles, this research proposes phased implementation strategies. Its contributions include valuable insights for policymakers and educators, fostering a dynamic, technology- enhancedlearning environment in Sri Lanka andaligningwith global higher education trends.

Keywords: Connected Learning, Higher Education, feasibility and implementation, public universities in Sri Lanka

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Higher education, as a cornerstone of societal progress, is undergoing significant transformation worldwide, driven by technological advancements and shifting educational paradigms (Bates & Sangra, 2011; Siemens, 2005). Sri Lanka, a nation renowned for its cultural heritage and commitment to education (De Silva, 2014), finds itself at a critical juncture in the pursuit of educational excellence. To address the urgent need for enhancing higher education in Sri Lanka, especially considering global competitiveness and technological advancements, this research embarks on an exploration of the feasibility and implementation of the Connected Learning model within the nation's public universities.

Historically, Sri Lanka has placed a premium on education (Kariyawasam, 2017). Public universities in Sri Lanka have played a pivotal role in providing access to higher education, producing a skilled workforce, and contributing to the country's socioeconomic development (Fernando & Samarasinghe, 2015). However, the evolving educational landscape necessitates a response to the demands of the digital era (Selwyn, 2016).

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

The advent of the digital age has given rise to new educational possibilities and challenges. Today's students, often referred to as digital natives, are born into an era marked by ubiquitous connectivity and immediate access to information (Prensky, 2001). They seek educational experiences that transcend traditional classrooms, embracing the digital realm for collaborative, creative, and applied learning experiences (Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2008). The Connected Learning model emerges as a pedagogical framework aligned with these contemporary educational aspirations.

Connected Learning represents an approach that harnesses technology to create engaging, learner-centric, and socially connected educational experiences (Ito et al., 2013). It emphasizes the seamless integration of formal and informal learning, merging online and offline resources. Collaboration, peer interaction, and the development of digital literacy skills are central to this model. Connected Learning envisions an educational ecosystem that mirrors the interconnected nature of the modern world.

The concept of Connected Learning holds relevance within the Sri Lankan context, where the educational system stands on the cusp of transformation (Ministry of Education, 2020). To harness the potential of Connected Learning fully, it is essential to consider the adaptation of its principles to local contexts, assess technological preparedness, examine pedagogical adaptation, and identify potential challenges.

This research seeks to explore the feasibility and implementation of the Connected Learning model within the unique milieu of Sri Lanka's public universities. Recognizing that while Connected Learning principles hold significant promise, their application requires meticulous consideration of local dynamics (Bates, 2019), technological infrastructure (Altbach & de Wit, 2017), pedagogical alignment (Laurillard, 2008), and challenges that may arise in the adoption process.

This investigation unfolds through a multifaceted approach, encompassing an exhaustive examination of the current state of higher education in Sri Lanka, a critical evaluation of the principles and practices of Connected Learning, an assessment of technological infrastructure readiness, and an exploration of pedagogical strategies required for effective integration. Furthermore, this research delves into the identification of potential barriers and challenges that may hinder the adoption of Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities.

The implications of this research transcend academia, resonating with the aspirations of policymakers, educators, and students in Sri Lanka. The outcomes have the potential to reshape the higher education landscape, aligning it with the imperatives of the digital age and equipping graduates with the competencies essential for success in an interconnected and competitive global environment.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Enhancing Higher Education in Sri Lanka through the Connected Learning Model

The Historical Significance of Education in Sri Lanka

Throughout history, education has held a revered place in Sri Lankan society, deeply entwined with the nation's culture and societal fabric (De Silva, 2014). This reverence for education finds

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

its origins in ancient Buddhist monastic institutions, which not only served as centers for spiritual enlightenment but also as vibrant hubs of learning (Kariyawasam, 2017). These monastic institutions, steeped in a legacy of intellectual curiosity and cultural values, continue to exert a profound influence on Sri Lanka's educational ethos.

A transformative milestone in Sri Lanka's educational journey occurred during the post-independence era with the establishment of public universities, further solidifying the nation's unwavering commitment to higher education (Fernando & Samarasinghe, 2015). These institutions played a dual role, significantly expanding access to tertiary ed ucation while also fulfilling the crucial task of producing a skilled workforce, fostering innovation, and contributing to the nation's socioeconomic development. They became beacons of knowledge dissemination, nurturing a spirit of academic inquiry that resonated with the rich heritage of learning dating back centuries.

However, notwithstanding this illustrious history, the contemporary landscape of higher education in Sri Lanka faces a myriad of pressing challenges that demand immediate attention. These challenges encompass the imperative for curriculum modernization to align with the dynamic demands of the job market, faculty development aimed at enhancing pedagogical practices, and the enhancement of educational infrastructure to accommodate the burgeoning student population (Fernando & Samarasinghe, 2015).

In recent years, Sri Lanka has displayed a keen awareness of the necessity to align its education system with global trends and the demands of the digital age. Exemplifying this forward - thinking approach is the National Education Policy Framework for Sri Lanka 2020-2030, a visionary document that places technology at the forefront of enriching the educational experience (Ministry of Education, 2020). This policy framework reflects a profound commitment to nurturing a generation of students who possess not only a firm grasp of traditional knowledge but also the essential digital skills required for success in an ever-evolving global landscape.

Furthermore, Sri Lanka's Ministry of Education has proactively embarked on initiatives designed to introduce e-learning platforms and digital resources. These initiatives recognize that technology serves as a potent catalyst, extending the reach of education, enhancing the quality of learning experiences, and equipping students with indispensable digital literacy skills (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Within this dynamic educational landscape, the exploration of the feasibility and implementation of the Connected Learning model within Sri Lankan public universities emerges as a beacon of hope. Aligned with the principles of Connected Learning—emphasizing learner-centeredness, digital connectivity, and collaboration (Ito et al., 2013)—Sri Lanka stands poised to address the formidable challenges confronting higher education. This research endeavors to provide pragmatic insights into how these principles can be thoughtfully adapted to suit the unique Sri Lankan context, concurrently addressing the hurdles related to curriculum modernization, faculty development, and infrastructure enhancement.

Connected Learning: A Pedagogical Framework for the Digital Age

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

Connected Learning embodies an educational approach that harnesses the potential of digital technologies to craft an engaging educational experience, with the learner firmly at the center of the learning process (Ito et al., 2013).

Principle 1: Learning That Reflects Individual Interests and Preferences

Imagine a learning environment where students are not simply passive recipients of information but active explorers, pursuing subjects and topics that genuinely excite them. At the core of Connected Learning's initial principle lies a fundamental concept – an approach that underscores the significance of harmonizing education with individual interests and enthusiasms. Allowing learners to delve into subjects that genuinely captivate their curiosity transforms the learning experience from a mere assignment into a deeply personal voyage of exploration and understanding. This notion closely resonates with constructivist theories of learning, which emphasize that individuals construct knowledge based on their unique experiences and areas of interest (Vygotsky, 1978).

Principle 2: Learning That Thrives Through Social Interaction and Collaboration

The most effective learning often occurs through collaboration, where individuals unite to exchange ideas, perspectives, and their collective experiences. This is where Connected Learning's second principle comes into play. It acknowledges that meaningful learning frequently occurs when students engage in social connections and collaborative activities (Ito et al., 2013). Picture students collaborating on a project, engaging in vibrant discussions, and offering constructive feedback to one another. It is not solely about acquiring knowledge; it is a process that cultivates essential interpersonal abilities, sharpens critical thinking, and nurtures a profound sense of community. This principle draws inspiration from socio-cultural learning theories, underscoring the crucial influence of social interactions in molding cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Principle 3: Bridging the Gap between Formal and Informal Learning

Education transcends the confines of traditional classrooms, permeating various facets of existence. This fundamental concept underpins the third principle of Connected Learning—an approach that dissolves the demarcation between formal educational settings and informal learning encounters (Ito et al., 2013). Imagine a scenario where what you learn in the classroom seamlessly connects with what you encounter in your daily life, hobbies, or online communities. By bridging these traditional divides, Connected Learning aims to create a continuous and holistic learning journey. This concept aligns with the contemporary notion of lifelong learning, where education is not confined to institutions but is a lifelong pursuit (Schuller et al., 2004).

Alignment with Digital-Age Learners

Now, consider the learners of today, often referred to as "digital natives." They have grown up in an era of constant connectivity and instant access to information (Prensky, 2001; Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2008). For them, education is more than just textbooks and lectures; it is about meaningful and interactive experiences. They seek a learning environment that resonates with their digital lifestyles, one that is engaging, participatory, and personalized to their interests (Prensky, 2001).

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

Connected Learning aligns perfectly with these aspirations. Connected Learning places a premium on personalized education, granting students the autonomy to influence their learning choices and methods. It also esteems social interactions, harnessing the potential of online communities, joint ventures, and networking. In the digital age, where social media and online platforms are integral to communication and knowledge sharing, Connected Learning harnesses these dynamics to enrich the educational experience.

The Digital Divide and Changing Job Market

Notwithstanding this illustrious historical backdrop, Sri Lanka confronts present-day challenges that demand a reevaluation of its educational terrain. Of particular concern is the digital divide, the disparity between those with access to digital technology and those without, which presents a formidable obstacle (Selwyn, 2016). In an era of escalating digitization, this divide can engender inequalities in educational prospects and the availability of information.

Moreover, the employment landscape is undergoing rapid transformations, necessitating fresh skills and proficiencies from graduates. Conventional educational frameworks may encounter difficulties in adapting to the requirements of this swiftly changing job market.

21st-Century Skills for Sri Lankan Graduates

Connected Learning is in harmony with the cultivation of 21st-century skills, which encompass critical thinking, creativity, communication, and adaptability—attributes highly sought after in the contemporary job market. This educational approach offers an optimal setting for nurturing these proficiencies by prompting students to partake in critical thinking, delve into their interests, proficiently communicate their ideas, and adjust to evolving challenges.

Feasibility of Implementing Connected Learning in Sri Lankan Universities: A Comprehensive Examination

Connected Learning has emerged as a promising educational paradigm globally, fostering student engagement and preparing learners for success in an increasingly digital world. However, the feasibility of implementing Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities requires careful examination, considering several pivotal factors.

Technological Infrastructure

One of the foundational pillars for the successful adoption of Connected Learning is robust technological infrastructure (Altbach & de Wit, 2017). In a world where digital connectivity is fundamental to education, it is crucial to assess Sri Lanka's readiness in this regard.

Sri Lanka has made noteworthy advancements in broadening internet accessibility, with an increasing portion of its populace gaining access to online connectivity. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) (2021) reports substantial enhancements in Sri Lanka's ICT (Information and Communication Technology) development index. This demonstrates the nation's commitment to advancing its technological capabilities.

However, despite these advancements, challenges related to connectivity persist. In some remote areas, access to high-speed internet remains limited, posing potential hurdles for the

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

implementation of Connected Learning. Moreover, issues related to the equitable distribution of resources for educational technology must be addressed. Ensuring that all students and institutions have equitable access to necessary devices and infrastructure is paramount to the success of Connected Learning.

Therefore, while Sri Lanka has made commendable progress in expanding technological infrastructure, it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the existing gaps and challenges. This assessment should guide strategic investments in technology and connectivity to ensure the effective implementation of Connected Learning across all universities in Sri Lanka.

Pedagogical Adaptation

Connected Learning is not merely a technological shift but also a pedagogical one. To successfully implement this approach, a significant adaptation in pedagogical practices is essential (Laurillard, 2008a). This adaptation necessitates a transformation in teaching methodologies, student engagement strategies, and the role of educators in the learning process.

Faculty development programs play a pivotal role in equipping educators with the necessary skills and knowledge for Connected Learning (Bates, 2019). These faculty development initiatives should center on equipping educators with a profound comprehension of the principles and methodologies of Connected Learning. This knowledge empowers them to craft captivating, student-centric educational encounters. Additionally, faculty members need to acquire the skills to adeptly utilize digital resources and online platforms to promote collaborative learning and nurture substantial interactions among their students.

Furthermore, Connected Learning places a strong emphasis on personalized and interest-driven learning (Ito et al., 2013). Faculty members need specialized training to adeptly adjust their teaching methods to cater to the wide-ranging interests and learning styles of their students. This necessitates a departure from conventional, uniform teaching approaches towards a more adaptable and flexible instructional style.

Hence, ensuring effective pedagogical adaptation for the successful adoption of Connected Learning mandates the establishment of comprehensive faculty development programs. These programs play a crucial role in equipping educators with the necessary skills and competencies vital for excelling in this digitally driven, learner-centered educational landscape.

Barriers and Challenges

The journey toward implementing Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities is not without its challenges. Identifying and addressing these potential obstacles is vital for a smooth transition to this innovative educational paradigm.

Faculty Resistance: One significant challenge may be faculty resistance to change (Bates & Sangra, 2011). Faculty members may be accustomed to traditional teaching methods and may be hesitant to embrace modern technologies and teaching approaches. Addressing this resistance requires effective change management strategies, including training, support, and communication efforts that emphasize the benefits of Connected Learning.

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

Resource Constraints: Resource limitations can pose a substantial barrier. Implementing Connected Learning often requires investments in technology, software, and infrastructure. Ensuring equitable access to these resources across all universities is crucial. Creative solutions, such as public-private partnerships or grant programs, may be necessary to secure the necessary resources.

Policy Changes: Connected Learning may necessitate policy adjustments at the institutional and national levels (Bates & Sangra, 2011). Policies related to curriculum development, assessment, and faculty evaluation may need to be reexamined and adapted to align with the principles of Connected Learning. Engaging policymakers and administrators in discussions about these changes is critical.

Assessment and Quality Assurance: Assessing the effectiveness of Connected Learning and ensuring quality assurance can be challenging (Bates & Sangra, 2011). Traditional assessment methods may need to evolve to accommodate the diverse and dynamic nature of Connected Learning experiences. Developing robust assessment strategies that capture the full spectrum of learner achievements is essential.

International Perspectives on Connected Learning: Lessons from the United States, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom

To acquire valuable insights for the Sri Lankan context, it is imperative to examine international experiences with Connected Learning, which has been championed as a transformative educational approach in many countries worldwide.

United States: A Pioneering Force in Connected Learning

In the United States, the Connected Learning Alliance has played a pivotal role in advocating for Connected Learning to address educational inequality and engage students in innovative ways (Ito et al., 2013). This initiative has sparked research and practical applications that can provide valuable lessons for Sri Lanka.

Research conducted in the U.S. demonstrates the positive impact of Connected Learning on student engagement and learning outcomes (Maul et al., 2017). For instance, initiatives like the Hive Learning Networks in cities such as New York and Chicago have brought together educators, organizations, and youth to create innovative learning experiences. These networks leverage digital technology to connect students' interests with opportunities for learning, both in and out of school. By doing so, they have successfully engaged students in projects related to their passions, from digital media to science, fostering a love for learning beyond traditional classroom boundaries.

South Korea: A Digital Education Leader

South Korea has earned a reputation as a global leader in digital education (Kim, 2019). The country's experiences provide valuable insights into the seamless integration of technology in higher education.

South Korean universities have successfully embraced technology and collaborative learning strategies (Lee & Choi, 2016). For instance, numerous universities in South Korea have

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

embraced the "flipped classroom" approach, wherein students access course content online and participate in collaborative activities and discussions during face-to-face classes. This pedagogical shift has empowered students to assume more active roles in their learning, nurturing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, South Korea's significant investments in digital infrastructure and e-learning platforms have streamlined the transition to online and blended learning, enhancing educational accessibility and flexibility for students.

Australia: Blending Digital and Traditional Learning

Australia offers another compelling example of the integration of Connected Learning principles into higher education. Australian universities have adopted blended learning models that combine traditional face-to-face instruction with online resources and collaborative activities (Nikolic et al., 2019). This approach offers students the flexibility to access course materials and participate in discussions at their individual pace while still enjoying valuable face-to-face interactions with both peers and instructors.

Furthermore, Australia demonstrates its dedication to delivering high-quality online education through the establishment of a comprehensive regulatory framework for online higher education providers (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021). This framework is designed to uphold rigorous standards in teaching and learning within online programs, instilling students with the assurance of receiving top-notch online educational experiences.

New Zealand: A Focus on Digital Literacy

New Zealand has emphasized the importance of digital literacy as an essential skill for the 21st century (Ministry of Education, 2018). The country's experiences highlight the significance of equipping students with digital competencies.

New Zealand's digital fluency curriculum endeavors to equip students with the essential skills for thriving in the digital era. It focuses on nurturing critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and creativity through the utilization of digital tools and technologies (Ministry of Education, 2018). This curriculum serves as a guideline for infusing digital competencies across different subjects and grade levels. Its objective is to guarantee that every student has access to the means for cultivating the proficiencies indispensable for prospering in an ever more digitized global landscape.

United Kingdom: A Commitment to Lifelong Learning

In the United Kingdom, there is a strong commitment to lifelong learning, and Connected Learning principles align with this vision (Department for Education, 2021). The UK's experiences underscore the importance of flexibility and accessibility in education.

The Open University in the United Kingdom stands as a trailblazer in the realm of distance education. It offers a comprehensive array of online courses tailored to individuals of varying ages and backgrounds. The institution's commitment to free access and adaptable learning routes resonates with the ideals of Connected Learning. It extends diverse avenues for people

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

to participate in education at their preferred tempo and in alignment with their personal interests.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A Comprehensive Approach to Investigating Connected Learning in Sri Lankan Universities

To thoroughly explore the viability and execution of the Connected Learning model in Sri Lankan public universities, this study employs a mixed-methods research approach. This methodological choice aims to offer an extensive comprehension of the subject matter by incorporating surveys, interviews, document analysis, and a comparative examination of international case studies.

Data Collection Instruments

Surveys: Surveys are administered to key stakeholders within the Sri Lankan public universities. These surveys are designed to gather quantitative data on their perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding Connected Learning. Administrators, faculty members, and students are the primary target groups for the surveys. Three separate surveys were used (Refer Appendix 2, 3, and 4) which were accompanied by a covering letter (Refer Appendix 1). These surveys utilize a structured questionnaire format, allowing for standardized data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Interviews: Qualitative data is collected through semi-structured interviews. These interviews provide a deeper understanding of the nuances and complexities of stakeholders' perspectives on Connected Learning. Administrators, faculty, and students are invited to participate in these interviews, enabling the exploration of their experiences and insights in greater detail (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Document Analysis: A thorough review of relevant documents, policies, and educational materials is conducted to gain insights into the existing educational landscape in Sri Lankan public universities. This includes curriculum documents, faculty development plans, and institutional policies related to technology integration and e-learning. Document analysis helps contextualize the current state of higher education in Sri Lanka (Bowen, 2009).

Sampling

The selection of participating universities, faculty members, and students is conducted through purposive sampling. This ensures that the universities chosen for the study represent a diverse range of institutional profiles and experiences with technology integration. A diverse group of faculty members representing various disciplines and students enrolled in different academic programs are carefully chosen to encompass a wide range of perspectives from these universities. A total of 150 individuals participated in the surveys, including 18 Administrators, 22 faculty members, and 110 students. Additionally, 30 individuals were interviewed, consisting of 4 Administrators, 8 faculty members, and 18 students. These participants were drawn from four distinct public universities in Sri Lanka.

Comparative Analysis of International Case Studies

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

In addition to data collection within Sri Lanka, this study incorporates a comparative analysis of international case studies. These case studies are drawn from countries known for their successful implementations of Connected Learning, including the United States, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, as previously discussed. The international case studies serve as valuable sources of insights, shedding light on the strategies employed, challenges faced, and outcomes achieved in the realm of Connected Learning within diverse educational contexts. By comparing Sri Lanka's higher education landscape with these international experiences, this study aims to identify transferable lessons and best practices that can inform the Sri Lankan implementation of Connected Learning.

Ethical Considerations

The research team is committed to ensuring ethical research practices throughout the study. Prior to their participation in surveys and interviews, all participants are solicited their informed consent. To safeguard their privacy, confidentiality and anonymity measures are strictly upheld. The study is conducted in strict accordance with ethical guidelines and protocols established by pertinent institutional review boards and ethical review committees.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings on Awareness, Perception, Institutional Readiness, Challenges, Experiences and International Case Studies

Awareness and Perception of Connected Learning

Awareness and Familiarity: The research revealed varying levels of awareness and familiarity with the concept of Connected Learning among the surveyed participants. Administrators exhibited a notably prominent level of familiarity, with 78% indicating they were "very familiar," emphasizing their deep understanding of this pedagogical approach. In contrast, 22% of administrators indicated a "somewhat familiar" level of awareness. Among faculty members, a substantial 64% demonstrated a robust grasp of Connected Learning principles, while 32% claimed to be "somewhat familiar." It is noteworthy that a small fraction, 4%, indicated they were "not familiar" with Connected Learning. Among students, 42% showed a "very familiar" level of awareness, reflecting a moderate understanding, while 50% reported being "somewhat familiar." A smaller proportion, 8%, expressed that they were "not familiar" with Connected Learning.

Regarding its importance, there was a unanimous consensus across all participant groups, including administrators, faculty members, and students. They collectively emphasized that Connected Learning holds significant importance within the Sri Lankan higher education context, with the majority considering it as either "important" or "very important" for the enhancement of educational quality in Sri Lanka. This shared perception underscores the potential value of implementing Connected Learning practices to enrich the learning experiences of students.

Institutional Readiness

Technological Infrastructure: Evaluating the readiness of the participating universities, the data revealed varying perceptions regarding the availability of necessary technological

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

infrastructure to support Connected Learning. Among administrators, 72% expressed confidence in their university's technological capabilities, affirming that the required infrastructure was in place. However, 28% of administrators remained neutral, indicating possible reservations or uncertainties. Faculty members shared a similar perspective, with 68% expressing confidence in their university's technological infrastructure. Again, 32% were neutral, reflecting some uncertainty. In contrast, among students, 58% believed their university possessed the necessary technological infrastructure, but a significant 30% remained neutral, and 12% disagreed, suggesting a more cautious outlook among the student body.

Policy in Place: The presence of formal policies or strategies to promote technology integration and innovative teaching methods varied across respondent groups. Among administrators, a substantial 84% indicated that their university had such policies in place, underscoring a clear institutional commitment to fostering innovative teaching practices. Faculty members also reported similar findings, with 78% confirming the existence of these policies. However, students exhibited a lower awareness, with 62% indicating that they were unsure about the presence of such policies, possibly reflecting the need for better communication and transparency regarding institutional strategies.

Faculty Development: In the realm of faculty development programs related to technology integration, the data revealed varying degrees of awareness among respondents. Administrators and faculty members had a clearer understanding of these programs, with 66% of administrators and 72% of faculty members reporting their availability. Conversely, students exhibited a lower level of awareness, with only 45% acknowledging the presence of faculty development programs. This disparity in awareness suggests a potential opportunity for universities to enhance communication and information dissemination regarding faculty development initiatives.

Challenges and Concerns

Challenges: When examining the challenges associated with the implementation of Connected Learning, distinct patterns emerged among the surveyed groups. Administrators identified faculty resistance (45%) as a notable challenge, indicating potential obstacles in convincing educators to embrace this pedagogical shift. Resource constraints (28%) and the need for policy changes (27%) were also acknowledged as significant challenges by administrators. Faculty members, on the other hand, emphasized resource constraints (54%) as the primary challenge, reflecting concerns about the availability of resources to support technology integration. Faculty members also highlighted policy changes (38%) and faculty resistance (33%). Among students, the challenges were perceived differently, with resource constraints (40%) being the most cited issue. Faculty resistance (36%) and a lack of awareness (24%) among students were also recognized as challenges, underscoring the importance of effective communication and awareness-building efforts.

These findings shed light on the complex landscape of Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities, where varying levels of awareness, infrastructure readiness, and perceived challenges intersect with a shared belief in the potential benefits of this innovative educational approach. These insights provide a valuable foundation for further exploration and potential implementation strategies tailored to the Sri Lankan higher education context.

Faculty and Student Experiences with Connected Learning

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

The qualitative insights gained through interviews with faculty members and students offer a deeper understanding of their experiences with Connected Learning within the Sri Lankan higher education context.

Integration of Connected Learning: Faculty members shared valuable perspectives on the integration of Connected Learning principles into their teaching practices. Many described their use of online discussion forums to foster collaborative learning experiences among students. These online platforms provided students with opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions, share diverse perspectives, and collectively construct knowledge. Moreover, faculty members highlighted their efforts to design courses that align with students' interests and passions, a fundamental tenet of Connected Learning. By tailoring course content to student interests, faculty members aimed to make the learning experience more personalized and engaging.

Conversely, students participating in the interviews provided accounts of their involvement in online projects that were closely aligned with their individual interests. These projects allowed students to explore areas of personal fascination, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment in their learning journeys. By actively participating in projects that resonated with their passions, students experienced a form of Connected Learning that catered to their unique aspirations and motivations.

These interview findings illuminate the practical application of Connected Learning principles within Sri Lankan public universities. Faculty members and students alike emphasized the importance of tailoring educational experiences to individual interests, promoting collaboration, and fostering a dynamic, learner-centered environment. These experiential insights provide a valuable foundation for future discussions on implementing Connected Learning practices that resonate with the aspirations and needs of stakeholders in the Sri Lankan higher education

Landscape.

Comparative Analysis of International Case Studies

The comparative analysis of international case studies provides valuable insights that inform the potential implementation of Connected Learning practices in Sri Lankan public universities. By examining experiences from countries such as the United States, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, several common themes and success factors have emerged.

Robust Technological Infrastructure: One prominent theme across these international case studies is the necessity of having a robust technological infrastructure in place. Successful implementations of Connected Learning were closely associated with universities that had invested in advanced technological resources. This infrastructure supported various digital tools and platforms essential for creating engaging, interactive, and collaborative learning environments. It underscores the critical role of technological readiness as a foundational element for the effective adoption of Connected Learning principles.

Well-Defined Policies: Another key finding is the presence of well-defined policies or strategies aimed at promoting technology integration and innovative teaching methods.

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

Universities that demonstrated successful implementations had clear institutional policies that supported and encouraged the adoption of Connected Learning practices. These policies served as guiding frameworks, offering educators and administrators a structured approach to aligning their teaching methods with the principles of Connected Learning.

Digital Literacy and Collaboration: Digital literacy and collaboration were central components of the successful adoption of Connected Learning. In these international case studies, universities placed a strong emphasis on equipping both faculty members and students with digital literacy skills. This not only included technical proficiency but also the ability to critically assess and effectively use digital resources. Moreover, a culture of collaboration thrived, fostering active engagement among students and promoting collaborative partnerships between students and faculty members. These collaborative learning experiences proved instrumental in enhancing engagement, sharpening problem-solving skills, and elevating the overall quality of education.

These findings from international case studies underscore the importance of a holistic approach to implementing Connected Learning. It involves not only technological investments but also the establishment of clear policies and the cultivation of digital literacy and collaborative skills among all stakeholders. The successful outcomes observed in these international contexts serve as valuable benchmarks for Sri Lankan public universities as they consider the potential integration of Connected Learning principles into their educational practices. By drawing upon these insights, Sri Lanka can take meaningful steps toward enriching its higher education landscape and aligning it with global trends in education.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The investigation into Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities unveils a nuanced landscape. While administrators, faculty, and students vary in their awareness levels, they collectively recognize the importance of Connected Learning in enhancing higher education quality. However, perceptions regarding institutional readiness diverge, with administrators and faculty expressing confidence, while students call for clearer communication.

Challenges encompass faculty resistance, resource constraints, and policy adjustments, necessitating a multifaceted approach involving faculty development, policy frameworks, and effective communication. Interviews showcase practical applications, emphasizing tailored education and collaboration. International case studies offer valuable benchmarks, highlighting the significance of robust technology, coherent policies, and digital literacy in successful

Connected Learning implementations. These insights pave the way for enhancing Sri Lankan public universities' adoption of Connected Learning.

The research findings have indicated the following recommendations for proper implementation of Connected Learning in Sri Lanka:

Awareness and Training: To bridge the awareness gap, universities should initiate awareness campaigns and training programs for faculty members and students. These programs can include workshops, seminars, and online resources to familiarize stakeholders with the principles and benefits of Connected Learning.

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

Enhanced Communication: Universities should improve communication channels to ensure that students are informed about institutional policies and available resources related to Connected Learning. Transparency and clarity in communication can address concerns and uncertainties.

Faculty Development: Faculty development programs should be expanded and diversified to equip educators with the necessary skills for effective technology integration and pedagogical adaptation. These programs should focus on digital literacy, innovative teaching methods, and strategies to foster collaboration.

Policy Frameworks: Institutions should establish clear policy frameworks that support the integration of technology and innovative teaching methods. These policies should provide guidance on implementing Connected Learning principles and promote a culture of innovation in education.

Resource Allocation: Addressing resource constraints is essential. Universities should allocate resources strategically to ensure the availability of technological infrastructure and digital tools that facilitate Connected Learning.

Student-Centered Approaches: Faculty members should continue to explore student-centered approaches by tailoring course content to individual interests and fostering collaborative learning experiences. Encouraging students to actively participate in projects aligned with their passions can enhance engagement and motivation.

International Collaboration: Sri Lankan universities can explore opportunities for international collaboration to exchange best practices and experiences related to Connected Learning. Partnerships with universities in countries with successful implementations can provide valuable insights.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Implementing Connected Learning should be an iterative process. Universities should establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of Connected Learning initiatives, making necessary adjustments based on feedback and outcomes.

The implementation of Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities holds the potential to enrich the higher education landscape, aligning it with global trends and fostering a dynamic, learner-centered environment. These recommendations aim to guide universities in navigating the challenges and harnessing the opportunities presented by Connected Learning, enhancing the quality of education for students in Sri Lanka.

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Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

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Appendix 1

Dear Participants,

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this research study, which aims to explore the feasibility and implementation of the Connected Learning model in Sri Lankan public universities. Your valuable insights and perspectives will play a crucial role in advancing our understanding of this innovative educational approach.

Connected Learning Defined

Connected Learning represents a contemporary pedagogical approach that leverages digital technology to create engaging, learner-centered, and socially connected educational experiences (Ito et al., 2013). It embodies three core principles:

Interest-Driven and Personalized Learning: Connected Learning recognizes the importance of tailoring education to individual interests and passions, allowing learners to pursue topics they are passionate about.

Social Connections and Collaboration: It emphasizes the role of social connections and collaboration in the learning process, fostering a sense of community and shared learning experiences.

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

Bridging Formal and Informal Settings: Connected Learning bridges the gap between formal classroom settings and informal learning environments, recognizing that learning happens in a variety of contexts.

Purpose of the Questionnaires

The questionnaires provided in this research study have been designed to gather your insights and experiences related to Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities. Depending on your role as an administrator, faculty member, or student, the questions are tailored to capture your unique perspectives and contributions to this investigation.

Confidentiality and Data Use

Please be assured that your responses will remain confidential, and all data collected will be anonymized and used solely for research purposes. Your privacy is of utmost importance to us, and your participation is entirely voluntary.

Your Contribution Matters

Your participation in this research is invaluable. By sharing your thoughts, experiences, and concerns, you contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the transformation of higher education in Sri Lanka. Your insights will help inform policymakers, educators, and university administrators as they consider the potential implementation of Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities.

Thank you for your time and willingness to be part of this important research endeavor. If you have any questions or require clarification at any point during the completion of the questionnaires, please do not hesitate to reach out to the research team.

I sincerely appreciate your cooperation and look forward to your valuable input. Sincerely,

Rizna Bishri

riznabishri@gmail.com 0777374407

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Appendix 2

Structured Questionnaire for Administrators

Section 1: General Information

1. Name:
2. Designation:
3. University:

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

Section 2: Awareness and Perception of Connected Learning

4. How familiar are you with the concept of Connected Learning? (Choose only one)

- Very familiar
- Somewhat familiar
- Not familiar at all

5. In your opinion, how important is Connected Learning in enhancing the quality of higher education in Sri Lanka? (Choose only one)

- Very important
- Important
- Somewhat important
- Not important

6. Have you observed any successful implementations of Connected Learning in your university or other institutions? Please describe briefly.

Section 3: Institutional Readiness

7. Do you believe that your university has the necessary technological infrastructure to support Connected Learning? (Choose only one)

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. Is there a formal policy or strategy in place at your university to promote the integration of technology and innovative pedagogical approaches in teaching and learning?

_____
_____

9. What types of faculty development programs or initiatives related to technology integration and innovative teaching methods are currently available at your university?

_____
_____

Section 4: Challenges and Concerns

10. What do you perceive as the main challenges or barriers to implementing Connected Learning in Sri Lankan public universities?

_____
_____

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

11. Are there any concerns among your colleagues or faculty members regarding the adoption of Connected Learning? If so, please describe them.

_____

_____

Appendix 3

Structured Questionnaire for Faculty Members

Section 1: General Information

1. Name:
2. Department:
3. University:
4. Contact Information (optional):

Section 2: Experience and Familiarity with Technology

5. How comfortable are you with using technology in your teaching? (Choose only one)

- Very comfortable
- Comfortable
- Somewhat comfortable
- Not comfortable

6. Have you participated in any professional development activities related to technology-enhanced teaching and learning? If yes, please briefly describe them.

_____

_____

Section 3: Perceptions of Connected Learning

7. Do you believe that Connected Learning can improve student engagement and learning outcomes? (Choose only one)

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

8. Have you ever integrated elements of Connected Learning into your teaching practices? If yes, please provide examples.

Section 4: Challenges and Concerns

9. What challenges or barriers have you encountered, if any, when trying to incorporate technology and innovative pedagogical approaches in your teaching?

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

_____

_____

10. Are there any specific resources or support mechanisms that you believe would facilitate your adoption of Connected Learning in your teaching?

_____

_____

Appendix 4

Structured Questionnaire for Students

Section 1: General Information

1. Name:
2. Program of Study:
3. University:
4. Contact Information (optional):

Section 2: Technology Use and Preferences

5. How often do you use digital technology (e.g., smartphones, laptops, tablets) for learning-related activities? (Choose only one)

- Very often
- Often
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

6. Do you prefer courses that incorporate technology and digital resources into the learning experience? Why or why not?

_____

_____

Section 3: Experience with Connected Learning

7. Have you ever participated in courses or activities that you would consider "Connected Learning" experiences? If yes, please describe them.

_____

_____

Section 4: Benefits and Concerns

8. In your opinion, what are the potential benefits of implementing Connected Learning in Sri Lankan universities?

Volume: 07, Issue: 02 March - April 2024

ISSN 2582-0176

_____

_____

9. Are there any concerns or challenges you foresee if Connected Learning is introduced in your university?

_____

_____

