

## EDITORIAL

On the threshold of the 21st century, universities have become more complex and the task before them more challenging. More than ever before, they are the meeting point of what are often seen as dichotomous goals: equity and excellence, teaching and research, advancement of knowledge and relevance, institutional autonomy and social responsiveness. Yet these goals are not mutually exclusive.

Universities can and should become institutions which attempt to combine excellence with equity. Academic excellence is not achievable solely through the improvement of university teaching. Universities are both the repositories and creators of knowledge. Higher education institutions which sacrifice research for the sake of teaching are doomed to sterility and stultification and would not be capable of contributing to national development. Ideally, research should be a vibrant process for investigating scientific and social issues pertinent to the academic disciplines and educational issues pertinent to the institution. It enables university teachers to play their traditional and necessary role of advancing knowledge. Furthermore it also helps them to understand the constraints which impinge on the effectiveness of the institution and to search for solutions to overcome these constraints. For research output to be maximally used, opportunities for dissemination of such output should be made available. When viewed in this manner, research, teaching and dissemination of knowledge, the three vital functions of higher education become interlinked.

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) has achieved many landmarks in its brief history of circa twenty years on the path towards the establishment of equity. Quantitatively, student numbers have expanded and the number of programmes offered have been increased and diversified. Access has been widened so as to reach men and women from the remotest parts of the country as well as those who differ in respect of age, ethnicity, language, locality and educational qualifications.

As a national university, which has the same legal or academic status as conventional universities, OUSL has striven towards excellence. Cognisant of the challenge faced by catering to a large and heterogeneous group of students, the OUSL attempts to support them by providing more flexible academic schedules, pragmatic evaluation schemes and meaningful assistance based on knowledge of student problems.

At OUSL, research is therefore not merely an adjunct of university teaching. In view of the wide range of backgrounds from which OUSL students are drawn, research into distance education, on issues of imbalances in representation, non participation, drop-out, patterns of performance and graduates' occupational careers need to be carried out to achieve the university's declared mission of increasing access to and success in adult learning.

This inaugural issue of the OUSL Journal has been dedicated to a discussion of several critical concepts and issues in distance education in recognition of the fact that distance education research is an indispensable tool in OUSL's efforts towards excellence in teaching and scholarship, while ensuring social equity. Credit rating, one of the basic concepts in distance education, has been examined from two perspectives Gunawardena and Lekamge focus on methodological problems while Weerasinghe, Algama and de Silva look at issues that arise from application of this concept. Raheem and Ratwatte discuss the implications of student performance in English, a topic of prime importance in higher education today. The fact that OUSL serves a unique type of clientele underpins the article by Jayatilleka, Lekamge and Weerasinghe which compares the characteristics of OUSL students with those of students in conventional universities.

It is our fervent hope that the opportunity provided by the OUSL Journal would stimulate free discussion and foster independent and critical evaluation of the views expressed by the authors and of distance education in general.