

## **The Implications of 'Block-Teaching Programs' and Quality of Teaching-Learning Processes In Higher Education: The Case of Mekele University**

Molla Demlie\*

### **Introduction**

Due to shortage of trained manpower in the country and the unattractive salaries in higher education, most universities and colleges/specially the newly established are suffering from lack of skilled lecturers and professors in many specialties. Mekelle University is one among these emerging higher institutions which is being challenged by shortage of staff in some specializations.

As a temporary solution to the problem and until the staff development program is complete some how, the University is practicing what is known as 'Block-teaching programs' of courses that lack professionals of either full-time or part-time lecturers.

The term 'Block-teaching program' is a method of offering a course by a specialist in the subject area invited from other higher institution or civil service in the country for a specified period of time. It differs from part-time teaching in that the course is given for a period of only a week or two intensively. It is related to part-time instruction only in that the person or facilitator offering the course is not a member of the college, the faculty or the university in general.

This paper tries to explain the merits and demerits of 'Block-teaching programs' in the university from the perspectives of the quality of teaching-learning and student evaluation and achievements, from the authors short time experience in the University of Mekelle.

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'Block-teaching programs' as outlined in the introductory section is a type of teaching-learning approach in which a certain credit hour course or subject is offered to students intensively within a week or two period of time. From the above statement, one can enquire as to how a two, three or four credit hour course designed to be given in a semester of four months could be completed in an intensive program within a week?

The instructor or facilitator through some means may cover the entire syllabus of the course. But, the problem is whether a student taking 14 to 16 credit hour additional courses, can learn the subject offered by an intensive program given the diverse characteristics and needs of the learner and other facilitator /lecturer/back ground.

One can imagine in this context that the 'Block-teaching programs' as a one way communication between the instructor/lecturer and the learner in which the facilitator gives stimuli to a class of students without a feed back. This type of teaching-learning is much passive that it could be thought analogous to a water pumped via a pipe into a reservoir.

It is agreed that good quality learning in university and colleges is made possible if the facilitator understands the characteristics and needs of the higher education learner. Thus, a lecturer who is engaged in a 'Block- teaching program' will finish the course content before he knows even the names of some of his students.

Moreover, most of the lecturers that participate in this 'Block-teaching program' are practioners who though have quite appreciable practical knowledge and skill, are in some way far from pedagogical practices which will make the problem far more worse.

Students once the course is offered will not have a direct access to their instructors for consultation except that they are provided with some sort of handouts; and it is observed that students study the

mere hand outs provided only during the time of exams and probably a week before.

Ultimately, it can be said that, 'Block teaching programs' have a negative implication on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education such as Mekelle University.

According to many educators, learning is a relatively permanent change in behavior due to training or experience. This implies that the instructor should develop some strategies to help the student retain information or to demonstrate a skill for a long time. In teaching-learning through block programs, the instructor could not get enough time to develop strategies to help the learner retain information or demonstrate skill in which case the student forgets quickly what he once knew through an intensive short time lecture or teaching, which we can consider as not a proper learning.

We know that also learning involves change in behavior in some way permanently. To ascertain the desired change, the performance of the learner is checked through testing before and after teaching. But, in the practices of 'Block-teaching', the facilitator being in a hurry to finish the course content in a given time most probably through lecturing, it is unlikely that he will get time to evaluate the students some where in the middle of the course in which case he will not get feedback from the learner.

In such programs, only one final testing is administered and the learners are evaluated through this test. The results so far observed are inconsistent in many aspects and generally the student's achievement is poor.

In these block-teaching programs, students are powered only in fact and procedure memorization, and they do not have the capacity to:

- Comprehend
- Apply

- Analyse
- Synthesize
- Evaluate a given stimuli or information in some way, that is, if students engaged in 'Block -teaching and learning programs' are evaluated against the learning outcomes of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, they will be and some are found to be good at recall of some facts - which is considered to be low-level learning.

However, one can not deny the fact that 'Block-programs' can help as a 'first-aid' to run the teaching-learning programs in these young universities until a fairly/relatively complete staff profile is established.

The practice of 'Block-teaching programs' in higher education in general and at Mekelle University in particular will affect negatively the quality of the teaching and learning processes due to the fact that instructor-student interaction is very low due to the short intensive nature of the program. The different aspects of the learner will not be understood by the lecture so that the role of the lecturer will be as a teacher not as a facilitator. The learners may not get time to retain information permanently and demonstrate skill properly. The product of such programs are learners with a high capacity of fact memorization and less ability or capacity to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of given information. Hence, the learning process is low level which will not be expected in higher education. To avoid such block-teaching programs, the following are recommended:

- Design salary and other incentives in the higher education to attract skilled and experienced professors/facilitators;
- Establish more efficient capacity building programs;

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- Encourage part-timers more than Block-teaching lecturers to tackle the immediate problem; and
  - Invite 'Block-teaching' lecturers with pedagogical skills until the institution becomes self sufficient with its own staff.