

SUBJECT REVIEW REPORT

DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY



**FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO**

11th to 13th December 2007

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1. SUBJECT REVIEW PROCESS

The subject review process introduced by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Directors and the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, now directed by the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council, has been designed to evaluate the quality of education within a specific subject or discipline, for both undergraduate and postgraduate programs in a university. It specifically focuses on the quality of the student learning experience and student achievement.

Higher education is a 'public good' and plays a crucial role in the economic and social development in Sri Lanka. As public institutions engaged in the delivery of this public good, the universities in Sri Lanka have a responsibility to maintain and improve upon the high standards and the quality of higher education.

This report presents the findings of a review of the quality of education provided by the **Department of Geography at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka**. The review was conducted at the Department from 11th to 13th of December 2007 adhering to the guidelines provided in the *Quality Assurance Handbook for Sri Lankan Universities*, published by the CVCD and University Grants Commission in July 2002. The review process was based on the Self Evaluation Report (SER) submitted by the Department of Geography and supported by the information gathered from the three-day site visit made by the review team to the department.

The SER has been prepared under following headings:

1. Introduction
2. Aim, Learning Outcomes and Program Details
3. Students, Staff and Facilities
4. Curriculum Design, Content and Review
5. Teaching, Learning and Assessment Methods
6. Quality of Students
7. The Extent and Use of Student Feedback
8. Postgraduate Studies
9. Peer observation
10. Skills development
11. Academic Guidance and Counseling

In the review process attention was focused on the following eight aspects as given the *Quality Assurance Handbook*:

1. Curriculum design, content and review.
2. Teaching learning and assessment methods.
3. Quality of students including student progress and achievements.
4. Extent and use of student feedback, qualitative and quantitative.
5. Postgraduate studies.
6. Peer observation.
7. Skills development, and
8. Academic guidance and counseling.

The evaluation of eight aspects was supplemented by the information gathered at the,

- discussions held with the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Head of Department, academic staff and undergraduate and postgraduate students and non-academic and support staff
- observation of departmental facilities (lecture rooms, laboratories, staff rooms, office space etc.) and other facilities
- observation of teaching sessions
- review of documents available at the department, such as examination papers, marking schemes, minutes of the departmental meetings, publications by members of the academic staff

Each of the eight aspects was judged as good or satisfactory or unsatisfactory paying attention to the strengths, good practices and weaknesses found in each area. Taking into consideration the judgments given to the eight aspects, an overall judgment was given as confidence or limited confidence or no confidence.

2. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY, FACULTY AND THE DEPARTMENT

The University of Colombo, established in 1942, is the oldest campus in Sri Lanka located in the heart of the city occupying over fifty acres of prime land. In keeping with its motto *Buddhi Sarvatra Bhrajate* (Wisdom shines forth everywhere), the University of Colombo strives to maintain academic excellence in all areas of study.

The University has over 35 Departments of Study in its seven Faculties - Arts, Law, Education, Management & Finance, Medicine, Science and Graduate Studies - which undertake regular courses of studies that are periodically reviewed and updated. Several extension programmes and certificate courses are held to cater to the developmental needs of the country. The University has also entered into several link programmes with foreign Universities. In addition to re-organizing the traditional undergraduate and graduate courses, the University has embarked on an ambitious extension programme maximizing on its advantageous position as the metropolitan University in Sri Lanka. In order to develop further this aspect of its academic activities a Faculty of Graduate Studies was established in 1987.

The academic institutions that are directly linked to the University of Colombo are Sripalee campus, Institute of Indigenous Medicine (IIM), National Institute of Library and Information Science (NILIS), Post Graduate Institute of Medicine (PGIM), University of Colombo School of Computing (UCSC), Institute of Human Resources Advancement (IHRA) and Institute of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology.

The Faculty of Arts is the largest faculty in the University of Colombo in terms of student enrolment. The faculty has eight academic departments, namely, Demography, Economics, English, Geography, History and International Relations, Political Science and Public Policy, Sinhala and Sociology. The University also has several teaching Units. The Journalism Unit was established in 1992. Apart from undergraduate BA courses, several Departments offer programs for Certificate courses, Postgraduate Diplomas, Masters, M. Phil and Ph.D degrees. Many students who successfully complete General and Special Degrees in Bachelor of Arts eventually register for postgraduate degree programs offered by the Faculty.

The Faculty of Arts has responded in various ways to the challenges and problems of higher education and employment. The introduction of the Course Unit System in 1998 was a major step towards offering greater flexibility to students in terms of selection of courses, their duration, new methods of teaching, learning and evaluation. The establishment of a Student

Computer Unit and Computer Teaching Unit within the Faculty has enabled students to improve computer skills - an essential requirement for the current economic and academic environment. Many students specializing in subjects such as Geography, Economics, Sociology and International Relations offer Computer Applications as a regular course unit. The English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) provides undergraduates with a working knowledge of English through its Proficiency Courses in English.

The Department of Geography is one of the first few Departments established in the University of Ceylon in Colombo in 1942. It was shifted to University of Peradeniya in 1952 when the Faculty of Arts was moved there. Subsequently, when a Second Faculty of Arts was established in 1963 in Colombo, affiliated to the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya, several sub-departments were also established. The sub-department of Geography was one, which became a fully fledged Department in 1967. Initially only undergraduate programmes were conducted by the Department. At present, the Department of Geography offers course units for both the General Degree in Arts (3 years) and the Special Degree in Arts (4 years).

Cartography and Principles of Geography are the two compulsory course units for students who wish to do Geography as a subject in his/her first year. Those opting to do a Special Degree in Geography should offer Elementary Mathematics in addition to the compulsory units. Students who wish to do a special Degree in Geography will be selected based on their 1st year results.

There are compulsory and optional course units for the students who wish to follow a General Degree with Geography as a subject and as well as for the Special Degree in Geography. A student following the Special Arts Degree in Geography has to offer 32 units of which 10 are compulsory modules. Of the remaining 22 optional modules some can be offered from other departments.

3. AIMS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

3.1 Aims

Geography is a multi-disciplinary subject which covers the understanding, analysing and explaining the reciprocal relationships between man, his activities, and the environment, both physical and built, in place, space and time. Therefore it is necessary to link Geography with a large number of related subjects.

In accordance with the mission of the Faculty of Arts to promote scholarship, critical inquiry, competencies and skills in the Social Sciences and Humanities in keeping with the highest academic and ethical standards in teaching, research, training and evaluation the Department of Geography aims at providing students with not only specific skills and competencies but also a broad social and humanistic orientation so that they could fit into a changing world of work with a sense of social responsibility and moral commitment.

The fundamental goals of the Department of Geography are to achieve excellence in teaching, research and outreach. In this context the department will provide,

- degree programs to enhance skills development strategies with the superior knowledge and techniques enabling students to become employable.

- a geographical knowledge and understanding of the physical and social environment that will lead to develop a geographical perspective, especially through fieldwork conducted by the department and other forms of experiential learning.
- an opportunity to enhance research capabilities in many disciplines through application and interpretation in a particular geographical context by doing the Final year dissertation which is an independent study of each student. This will enhance their quality and employability as graduates.
- the communication and presentation skills by introducing class room presentations in various academic programmes related to Geography.
- the context to be focused on real life situations by synthesizing the knowledge in other related areas using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and Computer literacy.

3.2 Learning outcomes

On the successful completion of the Special Degree programme, the students should have

- understood the synthesizing and integrative role played by Geography amongst large number of other related disciplines.
- gained knowledge to understand the characteristics of a place / region, how those characteristics are constituted and continually reshaped by physical, environmental, social, economic and cultural processes.
- knowledge and understanding of the spatial distributional patterns and dynamic nature of spatial relations, variations in physical, environmental and social phenomena.
- knowledge on how to incorporate the natural environmental impacts on human activities, human impacts on biophysical systems and the management of environment.
- information on reading and interpreting maps and understanding of their modern forms and dimensions.
- knowledge and understanding of a range of representational methods like , text, visual images and digital technologies (GIS and remote sensing)
- possessed a firm grasp of the main methodological strategies used in the analysis and interpretation of geographical data and information.
- knowledge with the strategies like survey methods, geographical field research, laboratory-based analysis, quantitative and qualitative analyses which are adopted in observation and analysis in Geography.
- knowledge to collect, integrate, analyse, display, and communicate spatial information and data sources by using mapping skills, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and other tools and techniques such as Air Photo Interpretation, Remote Sensing, Statistics, and Computer Technology.

4. FINDINGS OF THE REVIEW TEAM

4.1 Curriculum Design, Content and Review

Main areas of the subject of geography, i.e. physical, human and cartography, are covered in the curriculum. These main areas are then expanded and elaborated into specific sub-areas. A conspicuous character of the curriculum is its emphasis on quantitative analysis. Apart from the specific areas that emphasizes the core of geography, feeder courses such as GIS, quantitative techniques and field trips have been introduced with a view to strengthening the geographical perspective. In general, the review team was of the view that the subject contents of the course modules offered for the Special Arts Degree are sufficient and appropriate for the degree program.

The Department of Geography conducts lectures in **Sinhala** and **Tamil** media. The **English** medium students follow lectures conducted in Sinhala and the examination papers are answered in English medium. In 2007, the Faculty of Arts has taken a policy decision to conduct lectures in English medium for the benefit of the English medium students.

The course unit entitled ‘GYG 4191/GYG 4298 Dissertation’ offered in the fourth year of the Special Degree program allows students to exhibit their intellectual independence and confidence in conducting, preparing and presenting a research study of their own carried out under the supervision of a member of the academic staff. It provides an opportunity for students to apply the theoretical knowledge obtained in the class room to geographical real life situations. It is also noted that the department has been one of the earliest university departments to introduce Geographical Information Systems to its curriculum with a view to equip students with advances in modern technology.

However, the review team was also of the view that in spite of the fact that a large number of areas have been covered in the curriculum, there still remains a room for strengthening of the human aspects of geography. This is evident especially in the case of Third Year and Fourth Year curriculum. More attention has been paid to physical and supportive courses like research methodology, computer applications and quantitative analysis at the expense of human aspects of geography.

The designing of curriculum and syllabi is a collective task. Although an individual member of the academic staff takes the initiative, the objectives, content and assessment scheme related to the new syllabi are discussed at the staff meeting and necessary amendments are made. Then it is submitted to the Faculty Board and the Senate for approval. Geography of Tourism and Recreation, Environmental Geology and Applied Soil Science are the course units introduced in the 2007 academic year.

There is also an Annual Curriculum Review meeting at the Faculty Level. However, not all members of the staff can take part in this exercise. The Head of Department is responsible for obtaining the responses, comments and suggestions of the members of the staff and present them at the review meeting.

The review team is of the view that the curriculum design, content and review of the Department can be judged as GOOD.

4.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment Methods

There are **four categories** of students offering Geography in the University of Colombo in any particular year. They are as follows: Geography Special Degree students, students specialising in other subjects but offer geography course units, General Degree students and the Bachelor of Education Degree students offering geography course units. In the present review, however, the emphasis is on the Special Degree program in Geography as the Self Evaluation Report has details only on that program.

4.2.1 Teaching and learning activities

The department uses a range of teaching methods with a view to achieving the stated learning outcomes. The conventional methods that impart subject-specific knowledge and skills include lectures, assignments, tutorials and practical classes. To make it more learner centred, the department employs a variety of supplementary methods such as seminar presentations, group discussions, class room presentations and dissertation presentations so that students will acquire valuable generic skills that enhance their employability.

The Field Trip an essential component of Geography curriculum, which is incorporated into course units GYG 3152 and GYG 3262 in the case of University of Colombo, also helps students to acquire practical experiences in research methodologies in terms of planning of surveys, data collection, conducting interviews, data processing, interpretation and presentation.

It is noted that the department possesses a range of physical resources that could be productively used to enhance the quality of their students. A well-equipped and spacious GIS laboratory, map library with a large number of topographical maps and aerial photos, a soil laboratory (used only for physical analysis at present) are such resources. Also, the department has eight lecture halls and lecture rooms solely for the use of their students.

In the delivery of lectures it was observed that almost all lecturers were able to attract the attention and active participation of students. All of them used handouts and the white board effectively. However, it must have been more effective if the multi-media projectors could be used in teaching. Only in the GIS laboratory a multi-media projector could be seen.

4.2.2 Assessment methods

Although the course units are not credit-based the Grade Point Average is used in the evaluation.

The scheme of assessment currently used in the evaluation of course units are as follows:

End of semester examination -	60%
Mid-semester examination -	20%
Assignments and tutorials -	10%
Presentations -	10%

A slightly different method is used in the GIS course units. In the allocation of marks the criteria are the attendance to theory and practical classes, the practical tests and the end of semester examination are criteria in marks allocation.

The method of assessment provides an opportunity for students to exhibit their skills and score marks. As revealed in the discussions held with the members of the academic staff, the students have a greater possibility of obtaining higher grades at present.

It is the view of the review team that the teaching, learning and assessment methods adopted by the department can be judged as GOOD.

4.3. Quality of Students, including Student Progress and Achievements

The department has made necessary arrangements to ensure that good quality students are selected for the special degree geography program. The selection of students to read a special degree in Geography is based on their first year examination results. The requirements are to have at least two ‘B’ passes for the two **Geography** subjects and a ‘B’ pass in **Mathematics** taught in the first year. In a year, only 25 students who have scored highest marks are selected. From the very beginning, these students are provided with opportunities to maintain a cordial relationship with the members of the staff with a view to creating a conducive teaching and learning environment. The number of students reading for the special Arts Degree in Geography is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Students following the Special Arts Degree in Geography

Year	Medium		
	Sinhala	Tamil	English
2004 / 2005	24	6	-
2005 / 2006	49	8	1
2006 / 2007	25	1	1
2007 / 2008	22	4	3

The performance of students is monitored at several occasions during the program in order to know whether they are experiencing problems and to ensure that they are suitably equipped to proceed to the next level of the program. The monitoring measures comprise the records of attendance, marks for practical exercises, assignments/projects, presentations, mid-semester examination and the end-semester examination.

According to the statistics furnished by the department the students following the Special Degree in Geography achieve a **high level of success. During the period** 2003-2006, 88 per cent of the special degree students have gained honours with classes. Of them, 15 per cent secured first classes, 45 per cent Second Class Upper Divisions and 28 per cent Second Class Lower Divisions. As Table 2 shows the number of students with normal pass (third class) has been declining.

Table 2 Performance of students of Geography – 2000 -2006

Year	1 st class	2 nd Class Upper Division	2 nd Class Lower Division	Normal Passes	Not Completed	Total Number of Students
2003	6	19	15	7	2	49
2004	3	15	8	2	2	30
2005 (1999 A/L)	7	11	6	0	1	25
2005 (2000 A/L)	5	17	9	1	1	33
Total	21	62	38	10	6	137
Percentage	15%	45%	28%	7%	5%	100
Percentage	88%			7%	5%	100

It must also be noted that during the period 2003-2006 the ‘Niel Bandaranayake Memorial Gold Medal’ awarded for the **best performance in the Faculty of Arts** was consecutively won by the students who followed the Special Degree program in Geography.

It is the view of the review team that the quality of students, student progress and achievements can be judged as GOOD.

4.4. Extent and Use of Student Feedback

Although the Faculty of Arts has introduced a common questionnaire to obtain students’ views/feedback on teaching and course design/structure it is inoperative at present. The members of the academic staff in the Department of Geography , therefore rely on alternative methods to have a feedback on their teaching. Generally, at the end of a course module, students are asked to express their views on the lecture programme. Students’ responses to performance of lecturers have been gathered but it was not clear how they have been utilized to enhance the quality of teaching.

Also, members of the staff adopt various qualitative methods, especially through cordial discussions with students on a variety of occasions such as field trips to obtain their views on teaching.

It is the view of the review team that the extent and use of student feedback can be judged as SATISFACTORY.

4.5. Postgraduate Studies

The Department of Geography offers higher degree such as M.A, M.Phil and PhD. They all are research degrees. At present, there are 11 and 4 students registered for M.A. and Ph D degrees respectively. Also, during the period 2002-2006 four students have completed the Maser of Philosophy degree. From this year, the department has made arrangements to offer a Masters degree in Geography by course work. Simultaneously, a Postgraduate Diploma in Environment and Regional Development will be conducted and the successful candidates will be allowed to follow the above-mentioned Masters programme.

However, according to the records available the completion rate of the higher degree programmes is very low. As such, the department has to take measures to motivate candidates to complete their degree programmes. This is of especial relevance as the department is planning to conduct a taught Masters programme that caters to a large number of students in a given year.

The department has a qualified staff to supervise postgraduate students. Also, the members of the academic staff members are engaged in conducting lectures at postgraduate level in the other faculties of the university.

Some of the members of the academic staff are engaged in research extensively. Since department has facilities to conduct research all members could involve themselves in research at a wider scale.

It is the view of the review team that postgraduate studies at the Department can be judged as GOOD.

4.6. Peer Observation

The department does not have a procedure for observing teaching in a formal way. The practice has been to discuss the problems faced in teaching among themselves in an informal way. However, as a result of the Staff Development Program conducted in the university the junior academics have become aware of the significance of peer observation. Although this will have a positive effect on teaching in the future the peer observation is not practiced sufficiently at present

The review team is of the view that per observation is UNSATISFACTORY.

4.7. Skills Development

The department has adopted sufficient measures to develop subject-specific and generic skills of its students. It has introduced a good degree programme in geography and helps students develop their subject-specific skills further through laboratory and field practicals and field surveys.

Through the provision of IT facilities and training, opportunities for learning languages and improving presentation skills, the department has paid sufficient attention to the area of generic skills development in students. Also, equipped with a modern Geographical Information Systems laboratory the department is in a position to offer students an opportunity to develop a valued skill.

The students are supervised and trained to conduct independent research studies. It has helped students to acquire skills not only in research methodology but also skills in writing and presentation.

During the discussion held with students, the review team was pleased to find that the students are willing to change the medium of instruction to English. This would certainly create an opportunity to equip the students with language skills resulting in an increased accessibility to the job market.

The students are also engaged in various extra curricular activities like ‘kala ulela” vesak lantern competition, university sports fiesta etc. that develop and enhance their leadership qualities, organization skills and social responsibilities.

The review team is of the view that the aspect of skills development can be judged as GOOD.

4.8. Academic Guidance and Counseling

The university has a team of counsellors comprising a Senior Counsellor and five junior counsellors. During the orientation programme for new comers are guided in various aspects of university life by the Senior Counsellor. Also, the new students are assigned to a team of academic advisors for academic counseling. The personal tutor system is also in operation with a view to guiding the students in academic and personal matters.

Apart from these measures adopted at the university level, students are guided at the departmental level also. For example, at any time students can approach members of the academic staff for help. In some instances, students have sought assistance of staff to overcome their personal problems.

The review team is of the in the opinion of this aspect could be rated as GOOD.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the observations made during the visit by the review team, the eight aspects were judged as follows:

Aspect	Judgment
Curriculum Design, Content and Review	Good
Teaching Learning and assessment methods	Good
Quality of Students including Student Progress and Achievements	Good
Extent and Use of Student Feedback, Qualitative and Quantitative	Satisfactory
Postgraduate Studies	Good
Peer Observations	Unsatisfactory
Skills Development	Good
Academic Guidance and Counseling	Good

The overall judgment is suspended

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the Self-evaluation report and the visit of the review team following recommendations could be made:

- Explore the possibility of implementing a formal and effective mechanism for peer observation.
- Strengthen the human geography component of the curricula
- Improve the teaching methodologies by using more and more modern equipment like multimedia projectors
- Increase the utilization of the soil laboratory to the fullest extent possible
- Introduce a formal peer observation method in teaching
- Implement a formal student feed back system
- Encourage graduate students to complete their studies in time