

The World Bank Grants for Improving Higher Education Quality in Sri Lanka: AHEAD Grant Implementation Issues & Lessons Learnt: A Case of University of Kelaniya

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Abstract

This paper examines ongoing implementation issues of World Bank Grants for the Higher Education sector: Accelerating Higher Education and Development (AHEAD) at the Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies of the University of Kelaniya. The qualitative research method, particularly a case study, was adopted to collect and analyze data through the lens of stakeholder theory. In-depth interviews were conducted with several key personnel involved in the project. The data was triangulated with additional project documents and observations. Specific critical issues were observed affecting the original implementation plans of the projects. Covid-19 has become the major unforeseen factor affecting volatilities in project targets, inclusive of changes in the expected level of 'quality,' particularly in student-related activities. Despite issues in procurements and constructions, several positive lessons were learnt. Findings should lead to a generation of benchmark data in addressing project implementation issues.

Keywords: *Higher education quality, World bank funding, education project implementations, qualitative, case study*

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Introduction

The World Bank offers low-interest loans, zero to low-interest credits, and grants to developing countries like Sri Lanka. It provides a wide range of investments in education, health, public administration, infrastructure, financial and private sector development, agriculture, and environmental and natural resource management. With the current economic trends, investments toward higher education projects are happening in large amounts. However, the inherent characteristics of these projects include a higher level of risk and uncertainty, claiming an underutilization of the funds (Wickramasinghe, 2018, World Bank, 2018). Despite more than a quarter of a century of rigorous experience with project investment, international funding institutions and ministries of less developed countries, including Sri Lanka, still face serious project implementation problems (Filho et al., 2018, World Bank, 2010, Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018). Many are due directly to unproductive planning and management (Filho et al., 2018). Analysts have found that most developing countries simply do not have the adequate institutional capacity or trained personnel to plan and implement projects effectively (Mukhwana, 2017 Psacharopoulos, and Patrinos, 2018). Moreover, findings revealed that a significant limitation in implementing projects and programs and operating them upon successful completion is not financial resources but administrative capacity (World bank, 2010).

The Government of Sri Lanka, with the support of the World Bank, introduced two projects to address some issues in the recent past, namely, the Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education project 2003-2009 and Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century project 2011-2015. The Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education Project 2003- 2009

is the World Bank's first contribution to the country's higher education sector. The project wanted to make attitudinal changes in the higher education system, particularly to bring about more significant accountability through quality assurance mechanisms and link funding to performance through the competitive funding systems by implementing different initiatives (World Bank, 2010). These two projects implemented so far have shown favorable paybacks making higher education institutions innovative, responsive, integrated, and engaged compared to the past (Wickramasinghe, 2018). In addition, findings show that no significant procurement issues were found during implementation. However, the mid-term review mission-related IRQUE identified some general and specific problems, such as low review thresholds and agreed time-bound mitigating actions after the mid-term review (World bank, 2010). However, as stated by the World Bank (2010), the development interventions supported by the Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century project 2011-2015 follow international best practices from the Bank's engagement in higher education in many countries worldwide. Moreover, the project builds upon the lessons learnt from International Development Association's past education interventions in Sri Lanka (World Bank, 2010). Therefore, it can be claimed that future such projects may lead to identifying a distinctively Sri Lankan path that better suits are creating values needed for a particular industry.

As early literature reveals, impact studies of foreign funding have mainly focused on funding projects by the IMF and include diverse development projects in developing countries. This external financing was an option for those countries; due to persistent problems such as lower public investment, budget deficits, and depreciation of the exchange rates, those funding have no longer become an option but a means to manage



macro-economic variables (Conway, 1994). Similarly, the World Bank project funding has been made available to countries like Nigeria as a non-public source of financing supporting agricultural extension service projects (Michael and Ifemoa, 2020). However, countries like India have obtained the World Bank's support for controlling health hazards, e.g., for the Malaria controlling program implemented from 1997 to 2005 (Patil and Kumar, 2010) and similarly for solar power projects by India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka. The World Bank has conducted studies to understand what lessons they can learn from such funding experiences to grant further projects and policy recommendations (Miller and Hoper, 2000). According to Jones (1997), the World Bank initiated education development projects in 1962. However, such projects for many low-income earning countries have only become prominent since 2008. The World Bank has become the dominant funding body (Mundy and Verger, 2015) and an influencer in education policies in those countries (Nancy, 2001). Despite the above facts, there is limited literature on the review and impact of funding projects for education, notably higher education.

Studies on those foreign-funded projects reveal operational issues in the local context where they are implemented. For instance, those funding bodies have not been concerned about regional challenges and adoption difficulties. Thus, what matters is not the amount of funding granted but how those projects have been implemented, monitored, and evaluated. Therefore, researchers call for studies to reveal issues at the level of implementation in the fields, local resistances, and challenges to enable understanding of the level of adoption and real consequences in the local context (Patil and Kumar, 2011; Michael and Ifemoa, 2020).

The University of Kelaniya (UOK) currently implements several World Bank projects at both the levels of departments and faculties. However, compared with other fund-winning

tier-one universities, the UOK has been highlighted as a low fund utilizer during its ongoing initial phases of project implementations. Accordingly, the research problem is: Why has the UOK become a common fund utilizer compared to other universities? Therefore, the study focuses on the challenges faced when finding implementation issues to achieve the AHEAD (Accelerating Higher Education and Development project) project's objectives and: what lessons can be learnt through this project?

Literature Review

Project implementation issues and challenges

World Bank funds are essential mechanisms for refining the transparency and efficiency of the budget allocation process in higher education systems and improving educational quality. However, grant recipient Universities face several issues and challenges when progressing to the implementation stage. Viewing the results gained through extensive literature reviews, researchers have revealed the fundamental reasons why World Bank-funded projects are challenged, the reasons for difficulties they experience, and why some projects eventually fail. The high levels of volatility in a project impact the execution of a project within a dynamic environment. In a study of how volatility affects projects, Chan and Reich (2007) discovered two types of volatilities: target volatility and governance volatility. Target volatility is the many unavoidable changes that will arise during a project's life cycle that impact the outcome. Governance volatility denotes the numerous changes to stakeholders. Such volatility is often not adequately identified by project teams but has a significant impact on the development of such projects (Harvey et al., 2018).

Throughout the world, there are prominent examples of challenging projects. For



example, annual losses of large-scale IT projects lead to billions of wasted dollars (Chan and Reich 2007, Harvey et al. 2018).). The lack of adequate stakeholder engagement was identified as one of the reasons which caused the NPfIT's departure from the UK (Awwad et al., 2014). The several delays that arose in the procurement system due to several missed implementation milestones were among the reasons for the failure of many projects. These issues were also identified in the UK's procurement process used for the Libra project. The Libra project was described as a flawed IT project which caused massive complications for the UK government (Buhl and Meier 2011).). Avis Europe PLC introduced the ERP project in 2002; (Loh and Koh 2004). However, it was not a successful project as several factors led to the termination of the project, such as poor management and lack of full stakeholder engagement (Loh and Koh, 2004).

Turning to the World Bank-funded project implementation difficulties, many recipient universities in Cambodia faced a troubling problem regarding procurement. The World Bank uses countless rules on procurement-related activities such as advertisement and bidding regulations, receipts, reporting, transparency, selection procedure, and varieties of items purchased to prevent dishonesty and misuse of funds. The Bank applies varying levels of strictness in procurement depending on the country. For example, the World Bank froze three loans in Cambodia to protest the misappropriation of funds in 2006 due to widespread corruption (Hanna, 2000). In Ghana, the World Bank-funded Project evaluation team concluded that human capital expertise should be on board before the process begins to avoid delays and issues (Assudani and Kloppenborg 2010). Researchers revealed many cases where problems were identified promptly but with no remedial actions (Rappleye and Un, 2018, Datzberger, 2018). The Bangladesh World Bank project revealed inadequate monitoring and political interference in construction or internal operation were the main difficulties in project

implementation (Rappleye and Un 2018). The main reasons for delaying many projects were insufficient coordination among departments, lack of adequately trained and competent project staff, and procedural and bureaucratic delays within assistance agencies and national universities (Mukhwana, 2017, Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018, Filho et al., 2018, Rappleye and Un 2018).

In the context of Cambodian higher education projects, a study reveals how ignorance of contextual factors of funding countries by the World Bank in designing its credit policies has brought up challenges in their implementations and thus, emphasizes the need for revealing such real case shreds of evidence from different contexts (Rappleye and Un, 2018). On the other hand, a study of three World Bank grants (IRQUE, HETC, and AHEAD) reveals how the World Bank influences the quality perceptions towards producing career-ready graduates through its funding over 20 years higher education projects in Sri Lanka (Munasinghe, 2021). This study uses stakeholder theory to unveil further evidence in Sri Lankan context within this context.

Theoretical foundation

This paper uses stakeholder theory to extend the current theoretical body of literature to describe a more fine-grained approach to managing stakeholders in implementing the project. This, in turn, allows broader insights into the behavioral complexities of project management success. The stakeholder theory is a theory of organizational management that accounts for multiple constituencies impacted by business entities like employees, suppliers, local communities, creditors, and others (Assudani and Kloppenborg 2010). This view paints the project environment as an ecosystem of related groups who must be considered and satisfied to keep the project healthy and prosperous. When it comes to project implementation, the fundamentals of the stakeholder theory can be applied in different ways. First, project managers need



to identify the stakeholders involved (Assudani and Kloppenborg 2010). Secondly, stakeholders' importance and what they are expected to bring to the project must be placed. Third, each stakeholder's knowledge level should be recognized as each stakeholder's knowledge level regarding the project varies. Finally, the Stakeholder decisions are essential where the stakeholder theory comes into play. In a situation where every stakeholder is not part of the decision-making process, the stakeholder theory fundamentals are not practiced. An important decision not conveyed may result in project goals or milestone failures. The essence of the stakeholder theory is awareness, involved decision making, and keeping the integrity of any project first and foremost. Failing to implement the stakeholder theory in many projects can result in utter disasters (Assudani and Kloppenborg 2010).

The stakeholder theory has been explained in the project management literature based on its descriptive accuracy, instrumental power, and normative validity. The illustrative aspect provides a language and concepts to describe corporations, how they work, and their impacts on the broader environment. The stakeholder model has instrumental value in that managing stakeholders should achieve business goals such as profitability, growth, and sustainability. The third aspect of the stakeholder model is the belief that stakeholders have inherent value. These three aspects of the theory, although interconnected, are quite different; they involve different types of evidence and argument and have other implications. In this article, we focus on descriptive and instrumental values only.

The consideration given to the stakeholder theory and its impact on project management rises significantly every year. Different parties, such as scholars and professionals, consistently highlight the potential benefits of this relationship for decision-making (Freeman, 2010). One of the most related topical aspects suggests that stakeholder

management changes through time and provides a combination of different skills such as communication, personal, social, and emotional intelligence, which are needed to increase the efficiency of the particular project and are not easy to achieve with traditional methods of management (Eskerod and Vaagaasar, 2014, Freeman, 2010). Stakeholder management is now a vital instrument for the direction of projects, and the complementarity of this link makes project management a more substantial strategic competence for organizations (Wolf, 2014). In this setting, many researchers consider the relationship with stakeholders as one of the essential areas for the proper development of any project, where success is not realized without the contribution and satisfaction of the main stakeholders (Freeman, 2010, Hung, 2011, Uribe, Ortiz-Marcos, and Urubure, 2018). Therefore, stakeholder theory has been selected for this study because of its possible relevance to its primary objective.

Methodology

A qualitative approach is most appropriate for this study as it aims to understand people's experiences related to AHEAD Project implementation challenges and issues. The choice of a qualitative inquiry for this research mainly depends on the fact that it touches on a relatively novel area. Researchers in the study believe that issues cannot be meaningfully reduced into numbers. Therefore, the best method for this research seems to be exploratory. The case study has become the most suitable method (Yin, 2014). This single case study based on the University of Kelaniya focuses on a contemporary issue unique to the respondents and their role as project implementation stakeholders (Table 1). Respondents participated in virtual interviews through zoom, which made us use unstructured questions to provide research participants with the freedom to share their ideas and experiences openly. All interviews were held from July to August 2021. All



interviews were recorded with permission and later transcribed to confirm accuracy when reminding information. As suggested by Lupton and Lewis (2021), all interviews were conducted in the manner of a friendly conversation which encouraged informants to express their feelings and thoughts without any doubt. In addition, the researchers asked more probing questions intended to generate rich and depth information relevant to the research study. Also, as Dodgson (2019) mentions, the two researchers in the study tried their best to conduct each interview session without preconceived ideas. However, they were fully aware of their reflexivity and biases. Ten interviews were conducted with several key personnel related to the AHEAD project. The data are triangulated with other project documents, observations, and data sources.

was investigated, it was compared with prior codes to decide if it fits an existing code or is different enough to identify a new code. It was given the same code descriptor as the first if the same meaning. However, if not the same, it was given a unique code. The exact process remained until each transcript was coded in its entirety. Codes were then examined, and categories were constructed by grouping two or more codes together, converting them into themes. Finally, a cross-case analysis revealed major emerging sssssles from the entirety of the data analyzed. These involved the selection of categories for identifying similarities and differences. Finally, relevant main themes and sub-themes were identified.

Table 01: Participants’ profile

Position in the AHEAD project	The number of participants interviewed
Project Director	2
Coordinators	3
Activity Coordinators	5
Total interviews	10

Regarding the ethical consideration of the research, respondents’ oral consent was obtained before the interview (Dodgson 2019). Accordingly, the respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the study. All the collected data and materials protected the privacy and confidentiality of the individual respondents. All interviews except one were held in the Sinhala language as it develops trust and makes the interviewees more comfortable talking in their mother language.

The main research objective was to explore project implementation challenges and issues in the study, and this was the basis for a within-case and a cross-case analysis. Each interview had its primary goal of identifying challenges & problems and lessons learnt that should be considered in the implementation process of the AHEAD project. For example, subcategories of issues were related to the procurement, construction, and human resources associated with this implementation process. The interview transcripts were prepared, and the data were initially coded manually independently by two of the researchers resulting in many initial codes. The data coding process applied the constant comparative method. More precisely, as each next part of unitized data

Findings and Discussion

The final themes derived from data relate to procurement, human resources, and monitoring & coordinating issues, which align with project implementation issues identified in the prior literature (Assudani & Kloppenborg, 2010; Rappleye & Un, 2018) and theme Covid -19 emerged as a new. In addition, Covid-19 led issues can be related to the broader theme of target volatility, which Chan & Reich (2007) identify as unforeseen events affecting volatilities in project targets. This section seeks to analyze and discuss how these data-driven themes illustrate aspects of the stakeholder theory, particularly the descriptive and instrumental power of stakeholders involved in the case project (Freeman, 2010; Hung, 2011; Uribe



Ortiz-Marcos & Urubure; 2018). In line with the study's objective, we aim to highlight the project implementation issues and lessons learnt from the perceptions of the key stakeholders, which enables us to reveal how stakeholders act, interact with each other and manage them toward projects goals and objectives. Findings are presented and discussed next under critical themes.

Target volatility - Covid- 19 led challenges

All three projects were granted in the third quarter of 2019, before the outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020 in Sri Lanka. Initiation of planned activities had begun at a slower speed with a learning curve effect for preparation time, mainly in arranging a supportive environment including the required human and physical infrastructure. When grantees were ready to work from the second/third quarter of the first year, Covid-19 hit them, posing a significant challenge for activity implementations and gradually settling it into a pandemic for nearly two years. No such significant incidences were expected during project implementations, neither by funders nor project implementers, but such lead to volatilities of project targets and may even lead to project failures (Harvey et al., 2018). This section focuses on understanding any issues and challenges faced due to Covid-19 in achieving project targets during its implementations.

Project targets are set in several critical activities operationalized through sub-activities and implementation time plans and budget. Funds disbursed to each grantee were based on pre-approved activity plans tabulated through specific formats termed 'Performance Assessment Tables' (PATs). The total grant is claimed over the project period of three years as per the original approved plans. The overall performance is assessed via achieving promised outcome indicators quarterly over the project's periods. In terms of fund allocations, maximum thresholds have been set for expenditure items, namely civil work, procurement, consultancy, and other value-

added activities. In the current study, Covid-19 has become such a significant challenge affecting all projects, and volatility is apparent in different forms; one instance is changes in implementation periods, reporting postponements, and implementation delays.

We had planned activities execution to a specific time frame. However, we could not execute most of them in the promised periods. The main reason was the Covid-19 pandemic situation. It is not yet over. (Participant B)

Another reported volatility relates to cancelling several planned project activities. That is due to either inability to take expected stakeholders involved as expected or difficulties in operational arrangements. The project involves diverse stakeholders such as students, academics, non-academic staff, project administrators (vice-chancellor, director, project coordinators, activity coordinators, administrative officers), and logistic support staff such as procurement, construction works, and ICT support and external resource persons, suppliers, and the community at large. Stakeholder management in situations like Covid-19 had been challenging for project coordinators/activity coordinators and administrators. Especially for activities for which physical participation is required, such as specific staff training programs for which hands-on experience is essential. As a result, those events have been canceled:

OBET (staff training) programs scheduled in the second quarter were dragged out due to Covid. Out of 6 sessions planned, we could do only four sessions physically. As the required training mode was to have them as physical workshops with face-to-face interactions, Covid continues and cannot complete the balance sessions in this situation. I am to terminate the consultancy agreement. (participant D)

However, not all activities have been cancelled; instead, some implementers have



developed alternative modes to face the challenging situation. For instance, most student-related activities planned during the first two years of the projects have been implemented differently than proposed in-person participation modes. These successful cases can be considered instances of instrumental power by key stakeholders committing to executing planned activities to achieve project targets despite challenges. Such instrumental stakeholders were evident in the case study revealing motives for actions. As such instrumental stakeholders responded:

COVID has become a new normal situation for all; implementers must take a step ahead to plan alternatives rather than being rigid to the original implementation plans. Ultimately KPIs are affected. They [Evaluators] do not bother about the achievement mode but consider the output. (Participant F)

AHEAD project has now become a virtual one, having to do almost everything through online platforms, distantly. We do not know when Covid will be over, and we must think and act innovatively to face the situation. (participant D)

As data reveals, such efforts are made through much resistance. As one implementer questions, the suitability of such virtual replacements evidences the reality of expected project outcomes.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, switching to online mode is not an answer to everything. (e.g.)consultant who introduced the mindfulness program (for students) was reluctant to do it online. However, finally, it was conducted online; although the consultant was not happy with those sessions, we had to do it. Participants had no significant issues, and they do not know the difference any way how it would have been different if it had been conducted physically. (participant B)

Several other cases showed how key stakeholders such as students, staff, resource persons, and administrative staff collaborate to implement project activities and achieve project targets even under the Covid-19 situation. However, the challenge is not only achieving the project's targets as set in numbers, such as the number of workshops conducted, number of professional training trainers available, number of students participating, and number of events conducted but as interviewees are concerned, what matters is the difference in the expected level of 'quality' (participant A, F), as it differs under current conditions of implementations. Therefore, what matters under Covid-19 is the context in which those activities were conducted and not the outcome achieved in numbers. Several participants expressed their views as follows:

Students' skills development & English proficiency development workshops and training sessions were significantly affected due to the covid situation. We were waiting to do them physically, as planned. However, we started conducting some workshops through online platforms. Although those programs were not 100% successful, we had no option. We have done with the target. (Participant C)

Another instance relates to the implementation effort of activity transforming students from teacher-centred teaching and learning to student-centred learning. In achieving such critical goals, as implementers perceive, online platforms do not provide a conducive environment for successful student engagements nor provide options for teachers to deviate from student-centred teaching methods. However, to enable project targets, implementers have taken steps to execute such through online platforms admitting weaknesses of such.

We must think of several dark sides to conducting events online. For example, students' negotiation and networking skills cannot be developed. As a result,



they just become passive learners. So, our primary purpose of the activities remained unachieved, but the action was completed. (participant D)

Another challenge relates to construction works. Almost all projects proposed to construct of smart classrooms and equip them with digital equipment to facilitate student-centred teaching and learning transformation. Even though Covid led challenges, implementers have commenced planned construction works and procured required equipment, expecting Covid -19 will be over soon. However, the prolonged continuation of Covid and the resulting closure of universities for students for more than two years badly impact their completion and usage of items procured. In some cases, implementers had to respond to audit quarries as items procured during early periods remained unused for nearly two years. This has become a significant issue, especially for items with limited warranty periods.

Now for more than two years, students are not in campus. We have purchased computers and all teaching aid equipment for them. Early procurement remains unused, not even opened the packings. Auditors quarry us on this. They [Auditors] must concern about the context we are operating, and the auditors need to be looked at from the practical aspect in this situation. (participant C)

Another area where target volatility relates to the reduction of planned procurement quantities due to a Covid-led uncertain environment in the country.

In our PAT (project budget), we had allocated Rs 75,000 each for desktop computers; by preparing specifications, it was around Rs 90,000-100,000. After calling quotations, we could not see anyone quoted for that price. All were above Rs150,000. So, I asked them (the procurement team) not to proceed. Because we need seven computers, we

cannot proceed with the existing budget. By the time we get the approval for additional provision, prices may go up again. Goods available are also of not that quality ones. We will have to wait and see or order a less amount than planned. (participant E)

As a remedial measure, the World Bank had arranged an additional fund provision for the grantees to absorb any price escalations over the project period that can be utilized with the approval of the World Bank, providing proper justifications with evidence. However, this again had been a challenge for implementers and administrators to revise the budgets and obtain approvals frequently. Check and balances had been a significant issue for administrators taking more time for reconciliation works and follow-up for blessings from the relevant officers.

Before we authorize a procurement, we check the request with the PAT (World bank approved budget). Often, we ask coordinators to incorporate all revisions into the PAT and send us for approval. Earlier coordinators sent such PAT revisions to the World bank for approval. However, this must be done for each procurement or construction, so we have been advised to note such changes and do them all together in the next PAT revision. This is sometimes risky. We might approve overutilization if we missed any. (participant F)

As the above facts reveal, Covid-19 has brought novel challenges to reported project implementation issues in the literature regarding perceived quality variations of target achievements. The quality expected through the project and tangible outcomes achieved across student and staff activities differ in stakeholder perceptions. Additionally, idling procurements & related expiry of warranty periods, delays, and postponed movements. These findings provide a real-life context-specific story for target volatility (Harvey et al., 2018) caused by Covid-19.



The other project implementation issues found in the study are common to the literature despite different funding projects such as the IMF (Conway, 1994) and various projects such as Health and IT in other countries (Abbas, 2008; Buhl et al., 2011). The findings of this study confirm the prevalence of such challenges in the case of higher education projects in Sri Lanka. As analyzed and discussed below, they constitute procurement-related issues, monitoring and control, and human resources-related subjects and reveal context-specific factors for consideration in future fundings.

Procurement Issues

Procurement issues have commonly been reported in projects (e.g., Hanna, 2000). However, the nature and intensity of challenges had been increased due to Covid-19. As revealed by critical stakeholders involved in procurement, local business disruptions such as furniture and fixtures, non-availability of certain imported goods, and import barriers for items such as certain chemicals, desktops/laptops, and other ICT equipment have an impact on procurement delays, especially things that were ordered during the second wave of the Covid period from March 2021 to date. Project implementers have persuaded the procurement handling teams to call for quotations several times. However, due to limited responses by suppliers, the suppliers' selection had been limited from a few responsive suppliers in most cases and sometimes even a single responsive supplier. Project coordinators have shown keen interest in searching for suppliers with stocks and introducing them to the procurement team to ensure their activities are happening.

Another challenge relates to procurement bureaucrats. Project implementers preferred to have a direct buying approach where they get the chance to see the items before purchase and buy the one they like and not choose suppliers based on the lowest price offered for quotations.

There were instances when goods received for the prepared specification were not pleasing the users. That is because academics either get the support of the engineer or get specifications copied from the internet; for example, when we got classroom chair samples, user departments did not like them. The specification was changed several times to get the type of chair needed. If we can do direct buying, we can visit several places and choose before buying. It is not practical to call for samples for all the procurements. This has caused many delays in procurement. (participant F)

Similarly, rigid procurement policies were perceived as another area contributing immensely to delaying and challenging the procurement process.

We had to follow the government and university procurement procedures for procurements. When it comes to the World Bank project, if you analyze the expenses, you will realize that some unnecessary costs must be incurred due to rigid procurement policies. (participant B)

Most of the interviewees expressed their suspicion of possible dishonesty in the procurement process by misusing the rigid procurement policies, which is again a procurement-related issue identified in the literature with reported corruption cases (Hanna, 2000).

Job is awarded to the lowest bidder considering only the financial figures and not the quality. So, we cannot get quality goods or a service that is what we want. Sometimes we have enough financial provisions but no chance to get a quality product. The supplies division maintains a sort of authority; I do not know. If we push them for what we want, we will not be able to get our work done. (participant C)



As some of the education project findings reveal in Cambodia and Gana, such procurements related to unethical practices have frozen those projects. Rappleye & Un, 2018 show that in the context of IRQUE and HETC projects, the World Bank has not found significant procurement issues and instead has introduced administrative requirements over bid calling, transparency, and selection procedures and varying the items procured (Hanna, 2000). However, in the current study, interviewees believe that those rigid requirements themselves have given the procurement members a chance for undue advantages.

Sometimes, we challenged the procurement officers to request quotations from unrelated suppliers. Supplier divisions get more quotes; however, the prices remain high. For example, the price of a high-quality XX in a supply division quotation is around seven lakhs. We were pushed into purchasing them, although the same product could be bought from YY for Rs.35000. We wanted to reconduct the process again and finally could purchase X items from YY. (participant B)

Another participant's view illustrates why and how they perceive the existence of malpractices in procurements, and such evidence can be drawn through the following quote.

There are also some political agendas going on. I learnt that some suppliers have no products and are not selling any items as a business, although they have registered as suppliers at the University. (participant B)

Several other concerns related to monitoring and coordinating issues are discussed next.

Project Administration Issues

Under this category, many problematic areas revealed in the literature include monitoring, coordination, procedural bureaucracies, institutional capacity, and political influences

(Mukhwana, 2017; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Of these, monitoring and coordinating issues were apparent in the study. As the survey reveals, coordination of construction works was a significant challenge as it requires the involvement of several officers in some departments within the University to obtain necessary approvals before commencing such works and as well as for any necessary alterations in the construction works.

Most projects have involved consultants paying fees to get done works not familiar to academics- the best example is Smart-classroom construction. However, coordination between the internal responsible officers -engineers, and the consultants is not satisfactory. Internal officers take autocratic power over approvals. (participant F)

Dominant players' influence in the approval process was evident in other activities and for which project implementers found it as not supportive of their work.

Not enough server capacity is available from the University to implement the proposed Learning hub. Discussions are going on but face operational difficulties, e.g., due to the dominance of the ICT centre. (participant C)

Coordination issues were revealed about the conduct of English activities, one of the vital compulsory activities included in the project proposals. This activity necessitated coordinating with another faculty for its implementation and hence found many coordinating issues during its execution.

One activity must be implemented together with a third party-DELT. Face many coordination issues therein. Such delays are caused by staff-related problems such as change of HOD at the DELT itself, less supportive hands, e.g., delays in getting requested information such as English book lists, organizing difficulties of the certification course, and



even finding senior lecturers committed to English teaching. (participant E)

As reported in the literature, this study also finds human resources-related issues.

Human Resources Related Issues

In the context of this study, not only the capability of human resources but their level of interest and motivation towards works efficiency levels also pose challenges to implementers. One relates to perception differences between non-academic and academic members involved in project activities. Academics seek efficient support from non-academic staff members to get their project activities appropriately completed and in time. A common criticism was the inability to get a single work done without continuous requests.

Through my career experience, I have noticed that none of them willingly complete the tasks given to them When conducting a job, they take a ridiculously long time and do not complete the task well. To get your work done, you must make many requests and ask for frequent updates on how the work is going on. There are many situations when people must force the administrative officers and staff to complete their tasks. This is a terrible situation affecting the success of the projects. (participant A)

You always need to pay attention to the task and question them about how the work is getting on, at least to make sure the job will be completed. (participant F)

Apart from lack of support and interest, another issue confronted is the lack of knowledge of the critical staff dealing with the procurement activities. This was mainly related to difficulties that erupted when academics had to prepare specifications for procurements.

Coordinators must prepare specifications by themselves, which could cause various issues if they do not have experience. For

example, when purchasing laptops, we need to coordinate with the university ICT centre to get advice for specification preparation. This is another cause for procurement delay. (participant B)

The lack of knowledgeable officers within the University was a significant issue for the construction works. This is mainly due to high budget allocation for construction works in the total budget and the nature of specificity of the construction works, such as the construction of smart classrooms. It has taken academic implementers a long time to initiate such. As some expressed, grantees have been involved in an information search for such constructions before handing such requests to the University. They have had no advisory support from higher authorities, given this is a new construction concept for them. As a result, there had been several false starts and delayed commencing works. The lack of knowledge related to construction amongst the academics and gender deepens the situation.

As a lady, I have very little knowledge about construction activities, so I need to depend on the other party's opinion, especially the engineer's opinion, as he has the most knowledge regarding this field. However, this denies me the ability to make any suggestions or objections as I have no confidence regarding construction. Therefore, this makes me depend highly on the University work department. (participant A)

Having revealed project implementation issues and challenges, this study shows several interviewee feedbacks suggesting how the problems mentioned above and challenges could be overcome through their implementation experiences.

Lessons Learnt & Recommendations

Analysis of data that revealed implementers' success stories and failures enabled us to identify some of the lessons that can be learnt from their experiences for future betterment.



These include leadership roles, relationships, and flexibility.

The leader's role is crucial in the success of the project implementation. The below quotes supportive and affirmative views of two interviewees.

I am not the HOD, but the coordinator, so I get less support from the department members in implementing project activities. It is sometimes difficult to convince the members to help. For me now, it is a burden, become my job and a responsibility. (participant D)

It is not a secret that working with a university administration is not easy, so the leader has a vital role. A leader should know how to get work done by others. However, they should not all be the same, as everyone has varying leadership qualities that, without a doubt, affect the project's success. (participant B).

Some interviewees expressed how their strategies in relationship management help them get work done despite challenges. A solid and healthy relationship with the administrative officers is essential to complete work.

The coordinator should have a close relationship with the administrative staff and conduct regular meetings to check how the work is getting done and ensure everything is running smoothly. (participant A)

I had some severe problems with Mr. X and sometimes accused him. Later, I realized we could not get things done that way, and I tried to develop a close relationship like friends. In preparing the BOQ, we met Mr. X and explained our budget. (participant B)

Another critical factor relates to flexibility requirements concerning the procurement process. They voiced for financial freedom

without rigid rules overspending, especially for increasing thresholds and granting authority to implementers directly.

I was involved in another project from the United Nations, and it gave us financial freedom, unlike the World Bank. We could spend within the budget and had the privilege to purchase items from where we wanted if it was within the budget, and we just needed to provide bills and evidence. (participant B)

Flexibility is requested for academics to handle procurement by refining procurement policies, saving more money than spending more as used to be now with rigid procurement policies.

If you analyze the expenses, you will realize some unnecessary costs due to rigid procurement policies. As a result, the World Bank project needs to develop new solutions related to the procurement process as around 30% of the money is wasted during the process. (participant B)

Better to have a set of standard policies for procurement and construction to expedite work for all the universities that operate the projects. Mainly since projects are time-bound. (participant F)

Considering the context in which the projects are being operated, some grantees emphasized the need to revise the Key Performance Indicators for some of their proposed activities.

Original KPIs needed revisiting given the change in operations due to Covid. This will allow the creation of a novel set of KPIs and new work modes. (participant F)

Apart from the above, as some grantees highlighted, respective authorities should be ready with plans for how project activities would be continued after the project, such as initiating and allocating due power to concerned parties to be accountable.



The final feedback relates to the higher-level monitoring parties of the project, seeking opportunities to share and learn best practices from other World Bank projects across different universities.

OMST, as the central monitoring body, should create a platform for the project implementers to share their best practices and discuss issues that are common and must be done regularly. This will avoid unnecessary preparatory work. Here, everyone is trying to invent the wheel, and there is a lack of information support. (participant F)

Conclusion and Future Research Agenda

The present research attempted to clarify the particular project implementation challenges in the AHEAD, an under-researched field so far. Thus the study enlarges the literature about World Bank-funded project implementation challenges in Sri Lanka. The contribution of the study is two-fold. One is the revealing implementation challenges and contemporary issues as the investigation are being conducted during a project's implementation period. Thus, the findings of this study will help identify the critical factors challenging the successful implementation of the projects and enable to devise of preventive measures to ensure the meeting of project aims and objectives. Second, study findings would contribute to critical stakeholders -policymakers, the World Bank, and implementers in bringing their early attention to ongoing challenges and issues before the closure of the projects in around two years period. This will facilitate enabling the expected aims and objectives through funded projects to a great extent. This study addresses scholars' call to address contextual rich information for the World Bank project's success in education projects in low-income countries (Rappleye and Un, 2018). Furthermore, this research develops an argument that extends the stakeholder theory in that it shows how different stakeholders influence the project

implementation process. This study will benefit from adopting a qualitative approach and applying the case study approach that the researcher considers has been underexploited in project implementation research in the Sri Lankan context.

Regardless of the robustness of the qualitative study, there are several limitations inherent in the approach that make it difficult to generalize the findings of the research. However, in this study, the focus is to get an in-depth and rich understanding of the project implementation challenges. Furthermore, this research focused only on the University of Kelaniya as a single case study and academic staff. Further research could expand this investigation to other Universities and administrative staff. A comparative study would have to identify two project recipient universities that either use very similar or very different approaches to the project implementation success in their respective organizational contexts.



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