

## PROVISION OF LIBRARY RESOURCES FOR OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SRI LANKA

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**Abstract**— *This paper summarizes the development of university education in Sri Lanka and the establishment of the Open University. It then focuses on Open University library facilities for students and the acquisitions and collection development policies and practice of the Open University. Library services through its public libraries and the Regional and Study Centres are discussed. In conclusion, some current problems and future prospects are examined.*

Sri Lanka has a population of 15½ million and enjoys a literacy rate of 86.5%. It has an island-wide network of 10,000 primary and secondary schools. Education is free from the primary to the tertiary level. University education in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) began with the establishment of the Ceylon University College in 1921. It was affiliated with the University of London and prepared students for external examinations of that university. With the establishment of a national university called the University of Ceylon in 1942, the Ceylon University College lost its identity. Increased pressure for admissions, as well as for change in the medium of instruction to Sinhala and Tamil, resulted in two traditional centres for Buddhist learning being given the status of universities in 1958. In the meantime the University of Ceylon had established two campuses, one in Colombo (the capital city), the other in Peradeniya (seventy-two miles from Colombo). By 1967 they were split into separate universities: the University of Colombo and the University of Peradeniya; a College of Technology in the outskirts of Colombo was also converted into a university. A change of government in 1970 resulted in a further change in 1972, when all universities in the island were changed into the

campuses of a single University of Sri Lanka. A new campus in Jaffna was also established. A further change of government in 1977 resulted in the six campuses being converted back into six universities. At the same time two new university institutions – a university college in the south and a new campus for Peradeniya University – were established. The increase in the number of universities indicates the pressure on the government for admission to the university system. Approximately 25,000 students qualify to enter the universities annually, but only 6000 students can be accommodated in all the traditional universities. The Open University was hailed enthusiastically as a new avenue of education in Sri Lanka.

The Open University of Sri Lanka came into existence in July 1980. Two existing institutions, the External Services Agency (ESA) established in 1972 and the Sri Lanka Institute of Distance Education (SLIDE) established in 1976, were absorbed into the new Open University. The External Services Agency dealt with the external examinations and extension programmes in the field of education and languages of the former University of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Institute of Distance Education offered tertiary-level education in management, maths, science and technology through distance education.

The Open University offers courses leading to a Certificate, Diploma, Degree and to Post-graduate qualifications. Anyone who is over 18 years of age is eligible to follow the courses. Foundation courses are offered to those who do not qualify for admission to the Degree courses. Courses are offered in Sinhala, Tamil and English. The subjects offered are professional English, entrepreneurship, education, technology (civil, mechanical, textiles, electrical, electronic and telecommunication), science (maths, physics, botany, chemistry and zoology) and law.

The following media of instruction are used in varying proportions in conducting the courses:

1. printed texts,
2. set books and recommended reading,
3. demonstrations, practicals and project work,
4. attendance at face-to-face classes, seminars and workshops,
5. comments and solutions to assignments and written work,
6. audio and video cassettes, and
7. radio broadcasts.

The headquarters of the Open University are located at Nawala which is partly within the Colombo city boundary and partly within Sri Jayawardenapura (the proposed new capital of Sri Lanka). There are four Regional Centres located in four major towns. In addition there are nine Study Centres in nine smaller towns. These centres provide the link between the University and the student. The students come to the centres to collect their lesson material and also for face-to-face classes, seminars, day-schools, etc., as well as laboratory classes at some centres.

## LIBRARY

The library in the Open University (OU) performs two functions: (1) it provides facilities for the staff to enable them to prepare their lesson materials; (2) it provides facilities for the students who have to do some background reading. A central library has been developed at the headquarters complex for staff and research students. Other students do not have access to these facilities. The library has a staff of three professionals and six para-professionals.

### *Library Facilities for Students*

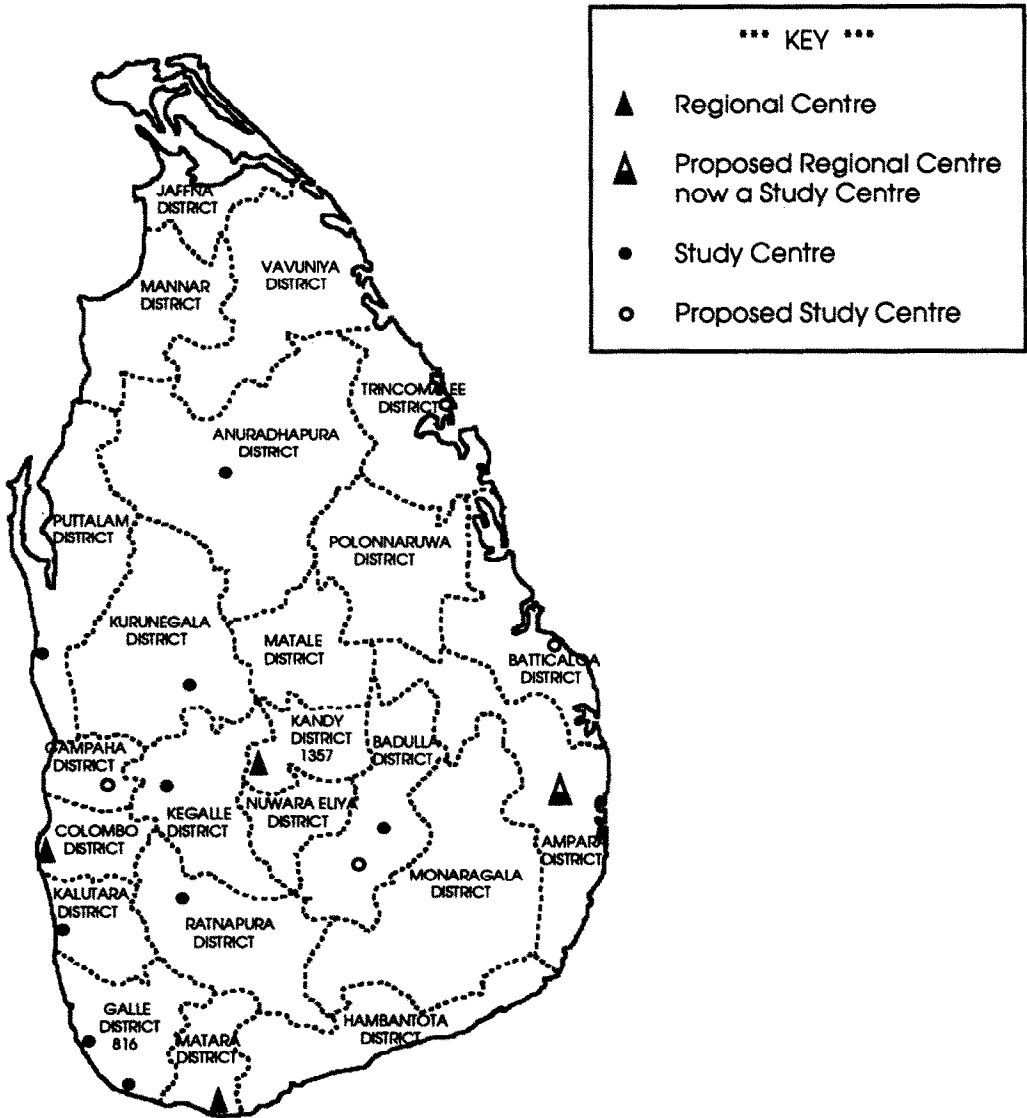
In Sri Lanka it is not possible to utilize the facilities available in other university and technical college libraries because they do not have sufficient copies of textbooks or reading space for their own students. If OU students were allowed access to these limited facilities, the students would be bound to clash, and the authorities are unwilling to allow such a situation to arise. Therefore, a way had to be developed to reach out to the student without placing a big burden on the limited resources of the University. The only way was to make use of an existing infrastructure. This was available in the form of the public library system. The public libraries responded positively to the suggestion of providing library facilities for OU students. They felt that it would encourage a greater use of their facilities which are underutilized.

The public library system in Sri Lanka is spread throughout the island. This means that most students would have easy access to a library close to their own homes. The libraries in the major towns are fairly well developed. As a preliminary step it was decided to select one library from each district to provide special facilities for OU students. The libraries selected by the OU were those already selected by the government to be developed as District Libraries. Sri Lanka is divided into twenty-four districts with a District Minister responsible for each. Each Minister selected the library for his district. The criteria used varied with each minister but generally the libraries chosen were the best developed in the district.

The public library maintains a separate inventory for these collections. The Open University also maintains an inventory. The books are kept as a separate collection for the exclusive use of OU students. The collections are serviced by the public library staff. A decision has been taken by the Council of the Open University to remove them from the OU inventories after a period of five years. Due to limited financial resources the OU has now decided not to purchase any more books for the public libraries. They are now encouraged to purchase new textbooks with their own funds and to keep them in their own collections. The National Library Services Board has also consented to purchase books recommended by the OU for the public libraries. Recommended reading lists provided by the staff are sent to the public libraries and the Board. If this situation continues in the future, the separate OU collections will be merged with the general collections.

It has been found that the twenty-four district libraries selected are not sufficient to meet the demand. This is especially so in the Colombo District, which has a little over 50% of all the students registered in the OU. The need to broaden public library participation in providing library facilities to OU students has become a necessity, especially in the Colombo District. It has been decided to enlist the support of the Public Libraries which are attached to the Urban Councils. These Urban Councils provide civic amenities to different towns within the district. They too run their own public libraries. The level of funding at these libraries is lower than that available in the district libraries. Six Urban Council libraries (four in the Colombo District, one in the Kalutara District, one in the Kandy District) have joined the scheme, bringing the total number of libraries providing services to OU students up to thirty.

Although the Open University was established in 1980 it took some time to establish the Regional and Study Centres. At the outset the premises of Technical Colleges in different parts of the island were used to conduct fact-to-face classes, day schools, etc. The coordinator was the Principal of the College. After some time Study Centres were established in a few places with a Liaison Officer of the OU in charge. The first centres started functioning in 1983 in Colombo, Kandy and Jaffna. These have become Regional Centres with another established in Matara. In addition, there are now nine Study Centres (see Figure 1). Once the Regional and Study Centres were established, it was decided to have textbook collections at these centres. These are looked after by the Liaison Officer of the centre and they are kept on closed access.



**Figure 1. Distribution of Regional and Study Centres in Sri Lanka.**

### *Acquisitions and Collection Building*

When the Open University was founded with the merger of the two institutions, ESA and SLIDE, their libraries were also handed over. This became the nucleus of the OU library, which began functioning in 1982. The bookstock consisted of 6200 books of which 3700 were multiple copies. At this juncture it was decided to have a two-fold selection policy as well: (1) to provide books and journals for the staff to enable them to write course materials, update their knowledge and engage in research work; (2) to provide for the students books recommended by the staff as supplementary reading material.

Since the Study Centres were not yet developed in 1982, the multiple copies of textbooks were distributed to the twenty-four public libraries. In Sri Lanka the National Library Ser-

vices Board is an overall authority that exists among other things "to advise and assist in the coordination and development of university libraries . . . , library services of local authorities" and "to carry out functions as may be necessary for the general promotion of library services." The Open University obtained the assistance of the Board in the distribution of the textbooks. The OU prepared the packages for the different libraries and handed them over to the National Library Services Board. They contacted the librarians who were given travel and subsistence costs by the Board to come to Board headquarters and collect the packages. In addition the Board purchased multiple copies of a few texts that were recommended by OU staff and distributed them to the public libraries for the use of OU students.

Books are ordered by the library staff in consultation with the academic staff. A close liaison is maintained with the academic staff of the university. Very few books are available locally, so most materials have to be obtained from abroad. Since this involves a great deal of red tape, the library does not place any direct orders. Instead, tenders are called locally and the purchasing is handed over to the agency that provides the best terms. This is reviewed annually. Since books are obtained by sea mail, there is a long delay (from six months to two years) from receipt of the order to receipt of the books. This delay seems inevitable and has been accepted with a degree of resignation.

In 1982 the University Grants Commission allocated Rs200,000 (approximately £5000) for the purchase of books and periodicals. This allocation was totally insufficient to build up a university library, and other avenues had to be explored. There is a UNESCO/UNDP project to develop science and technology in the University. Since this project includes the provision of books in science and technology it was possible to obtain an allocation of 1 million rupees for the purchase of books. In addition the library obtained substantial donations through the British Council and The Netherlands Literature Programme.

Once the decision was made to set up textbook collections at the Regional and Study Centres, the UGC was made to realize that their allocation was inadequate. The UGC therefore increased the grant to 1 million rupees per annum from 1986. This grant is currently (1987) sufficient to meet the needs of both staff and students. The book stock at the headquarters is 11,000 and at the centres 1300.

## LIBRARY SERVICES

### *Public Libraries*

At the outset all the books were kept on reference. Some time after the system began functioning, however, the public libraries informed the University that students were requesting the provision of loan facilities. It was decided that all students following degree courses and in the second year or beyond, as well as those doing postgraduate courses, might be given loan facilities. Those in the first year of the degree course or following one-year courses were given only reference facilities because of the high drop-out rate in these courses. Those entitled to loan facilities had to keep a deposit in the library and obtain a guarantor. The University had to assign students to the different libraries and inform the libraries once examinations were over. The public library had to inform the University if books were not returned by this time. The University will withhold a student's certificate until he is cleared by the public library.

### *Regional and Study Centres*

All books are kept on reference because the dropout rate is still very high. This situation will be reviewed from time to time. Only single copies of textbooks are available at the

centres, except the Colombo Regional Centre, which has multiple copies because more than half the student population is registered at this centre.

### CONCLUSION

The library system set up for the students currently provides only the basic requirements. It has still not been possible to provide all the textbooks required by students in all centres. This is due to the delay in receiving books from abroad. With time this defect should be remedied to a great extent.

In addition there is a staff shortage; with the increase in the financial grant, the work load has also increased. There is no possibility of increasing staff in the near future due to financial constraints. It is hoped to resolve this problem by computerizing certain procedures such as acquisitions and cataloguing using a microcomputer, thus eliminating wasteful repetition.

In some distance education institutions a student may request a book from the library and it is posted directly to his home. This possibility needs to be explored further, although it would entail additional expenditure such as increased staff, larger book stock and postage costs. In addition in a Third World country such as Sri Lanka book prices are exorbitant compared to normal living costs in the country. This would lead to temptation, and book losses would be high unless safeguards were built into the system.

Under existing circumstances it has not been possible to provide the ideal situation where the student can carry out his own literature and information searches. Although the public libraries do have a reference collection, their stocks are rather limited, so that sophisticated searches cannot be carried out. The need for this type of service has not arisen yet, since students have not reached the final level of degree courses. If and when it arises, it may be necessary to obtain special permission for limited numbers of students to have access to university libraries in the country.

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