

---

# **Project for enhancement of Distance Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka with British Overseas Development Assistance - An overview**

---

**By Buddhi Weerasinghe**  
Co-designer of Project / Project Manager

## **Abstract**

*This paper presents an overview of a project for enhancement of distance education that was implemented at the Open University of Sri Lanka, 1995–1998, with British Overseas Development Assistance. It briefly explains the background to the project and how it was formulated. It then outlines the project components and sets forth the experiences obtained during project implementation. The paper also attempts to provide a review of outcomes and future possibilities.*

## Introduction

The last two decades have seen a phenomenal growth in Distance Education worldwide. The developing world seemingly views it as a means of providing alternate opportunities for education to the masses, and as a way of achieving much with little. Koul (1993) has assessed the lack of research and development within Indian Distance Education after a decade in which the growth of the student population and number of courses produced has been incredibly high. Whilst acknowledging the production pressures under which staff work, he argues that without research and development, a distance educational institution will not be of any real value in serving socio-educational empowerment. The situation is not very different in most developing countries where equity and quality are not mutually exclusive. In 1993, The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), commenced negotiations with the British Council for a project to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the Open University of Sri Lanka to deliver high quality distance education. The identification process of project components shared a common malaise with many distance education institutions in developing countries - the fact, that most staff come from conventional universities and therefore have a tendency to look to conventional universities to set norms for learning and teaching.

Two main thrusts were identified. They were,

- the strengthening of research into distance education, and
- providing training in the production and development of integrated multi-media distance education course material.

The initial needs analysis was carried out by a United Kingdom consultant from Open University, UK (OUUK) with the Director, Educational Technology, OUSL, as his counterpart. This phase involved brainstorming with senior staff members of the OUSL. The consultancy was supported by the British Council.

The recommendations that were formulated subsequently were discussed with the Deans of the three Faculties of study and the Vice Chancellor. The Director, Educational Technology was requested to further ratify the identified project components, through comparison with other situations, during a study tour of three Open Universities, Open University of the

United Kingdom, Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan, and Indira Gandhi National Open University, India.

The morale of this exercise was to study a model of excellence in a developed country in comparison to three developing country scenarios. The British Council and the Commonwealth of Learning jointly sponsored this exercise.

The actual development of the project proposal in 1994 had a lengthy gestation period due to the stringent specifications of the presentation format required for ODA, Overseas Development Assistance (now DfID, Department for International Development) proposals. The Project formulation was a collaboration between the Deputy Director of the British Council and the Director, Educational Technology, OUSL. Allowing further time required for formalities between the two Governments, Sri Lanka and Great Britain, the project was finally launched in December 1995. The project grant amounted to eight hundred thousand Pounds Sterling for a period of three years (December 1995 to December 1998). The grant was later increased by another hundred thousand Pounds Sterling to allow for management training of senior staff of OUSL.

The target areas identified for assistance in the proposal were as follows:

- Upgrading of skills and potential for distance education research
- Development of a management information system (MIS)
- Enhancement of skills for design and production of course material
- Improvement of course administration
- Streamlining of the student support system.
- Short and long term overseas training for staff
- Acquisition of equipment, software and books as relevant, and
- Management training of academic and administrative staff

## **Project Components**

The aim of the staff training anticipated under the project, was to decentralise know-how and skills to the three faculties and the Division of Educational Technology. This was felt essential taking into account the socio-economic environment at the commencement of the project. The

creation of new cadre positions and new recruitments were frozen. It was mandatory therefore that necessary skills were decentralised. Multi-skilling of staff seemed to be the most viable option, although the Fordist approach was the more accepted scenario for staff training in a developed world distance education institute (Keegan, 1983; Black, 1995). The staff training, outputs from project-type assignments, and lessons learnt, were expected to evolve into a system of quality assurance and quality standards for each area of a project component.

Augmentations 1 - 4 further describe activities and achievements under project components except that of Management Information System which, is dealt with in a separate presentation.

### **Research into distance education**

The upgrading of skills and potential for distance education research, had several identified sub areas for action. It was to begin with a situation audit. This was to be followed by training in methodology for research and research surveys, with project-type assignments under supervision of consultants. Project reports were expected as intended outputs within specified periods.

At the time of project commencement, research into distance education was just beginning at OUSL, with a small 'cell' being established at the division of educational technology. The Director, Educational Technology, one full time member from the Division of Educational Technology, and a senior staff member on part-time release from the Department of Education constituted this cell. An important activity was the collection of OUSL student profiles and this was in progress at the time of project commencement (Jayathilake et al., 1997).

### **Management Information System**

The development of a Management Information System was urgently needed to provide baseline data for research as well as policy decisions. The existing OUSL database was inadequate both in terms of the hardware capacity and its on-line information generation ability. The Educational Technology Division had commenced compiling student profiles prior to the ODA Project. However, the integration of these profiles into a fully fledged database was an urgent priority. Database development turned out to be the most controversial element in the project. The OUSL aspired for a

Knowledge Based System (KBS). It was initially thought to be feasible. However, halfway through the project period, the focus was re-directed to a traditional MIS while allowing parallel development of a proto-type KBS. The clientele of the MIS was identified as follows:

- Students seeking academic guidelines and counselling
- Teachers seeking student statistics and profiles needed for research and academic policy decisions
- Administrative staff seeking information to base decision making

### **Design of study material**

The design and production of study material was felt to be the most important component. The division of Educational Technology had some staff training initiatives in place at the time of project commencement (Gunawardena et al., 1998). Training staff for the production of audio visual material was being adequately carried out. Therefore, this was not included within this project component. Guidelines for lesson writing had been compiled and a House Style for print material was in preparation. Several departments of study were by then exposed, separately, to a one day workshop in distance writing. Two situation audits were proposed , one in material design for distance education and the other in desk top publishing. This was to be followed by training in both areas. The acquisition of computer hardware to support desk top publishing was anticipated. Material design training was to be followed up with projects for material design and transformation under supervision of consultants. Each academic department was expected to complete a model course unit by the end of the project period.

### **Course administration and student support**

The course administration and the student support system were combined into one situation audit. By the time of the audit , several measures were being adopted by the university to improve both aspects. While noting the recommendations made by the foreign expert, the university decided that both aspects could be tackled under the university's own initiative. Thus these two components were not elaborated on further during the project life span.

## **Staff training**

The overseas staff training was organised into two categories

- Training in the UK
- Training in countries other than UK.

The purpose of having these two categories was to enable the Open University to gain from experiences of a developed country scenario as well as developing countries. India , Thailand and South Africa were the three countries to which trainees/ participants were finally sent.

Three types of training were envisaged.

- Long term attachments (1 year M.Phils.)
- Short term attachments (2-3 months)
- Study tours ( 1-2 weeks )

The initial focus was entirely on academic staff. It was later felt that exposure of administrative staff to overseas institutions would be an advantage. The attachments revolved around research training and material production. The academic staff benefited from the long and short term training. Senior members of the academic as well as administrative staff benefited from the study tours.

## **Equipment, software and books**

The acquisition of equipment, software and books were to be done on recommendation of foreign consultants within the different project components.

Initial expectations were, that much of this allocation, would be spent on computer equipment and software for the MIS, desktop publishing and research. The project proved this to be right although strengthening the university press was also achieved to some extent.

## **Management training**

This component was an addition made subsequent to the mid term review of the project. ODA (DfID) and British Council advocated the addition of this

component and enhanced the project grant with an additional hundred thousand Pounds Sterling.

Residential workshops oriented training was carried out for senior academic and administrative staff of the university.

The overall contribution of this training and its relevance however remain a doubtful entity.

## **Project Implementation, Management and Monitoring**

The overall project monitoring was to be carried out by ODA/ South East Asia Division (SEAD) , Bangkok. The project management was awarded to British Council, Colombo, after calling for tenders by SEAD. The project Co-ordinator at the British Council was responsible for liaison and implementation of identified activities and processes. The OUSL also appointed a project manager and a project monitoring team. The OUSL project monitoring team comprised the officers of the university and other senior staff, (the Vice Chancellor, Registrar, the Deans of the Faculties, Director, Educational Technology, Director, Regional Services, Director, Operations, the Librarian and the Bursar). The monitoring committee reviewed progress of the project at monthly meetings.

Perhaps the unique feature was that the project had no full time manager at the OUSL. It was a voluntary task carried out by the Director, Educational Technology. An administrative secretary recruited on contract basis for the project period supported him.

The responsibility for each project component was delegated to a team with a team leader. They were elected from senior members of staff (both academic and administrative as relevant), and were to report to the monitoring committee through the project manager. Selection of consultants from a list submitted by the British Council was the responsibility of each team. The Terms of Reference for each consultancy was drawn up by the team, in consultation with consultants and subject to perusal by the monitoring committee. The team leader played the role of local counterpart to overseas consultant(s) for the project component(s).

Recommendations made by consultants after the situation audit was deliberated upon for suitability to the OUSL and adopted as relevant and pursued thereafter.

Dialogue between the British Council and the OUSL occurred as and when the need surfaced.

## **Revisiting the project with hindsight**

### **The team concept**

The team concept was a success. The team leaders rose to the task with dedication. The teams built up rapport with the overseas consultants. The consultants tended to expect rapid changes and progression. Occasionally, the recommendations assumed infrastructure capabilities, which were unrealistic. These were amended or not accepted after deliberation. Team collaboration was an appropriate means of strengthening an OUSL perspective in the activities.

### **Project-type assignments**

The number of project-type assignments was perhaps over ambitious. It taxed the trainees for time and effort. The amount of work undertaken was a commitment on the part of OUSL, sometimes against caution by consultants. The desire to achieve too much in too little time put pressure on the consultant's time too, which was usually a short duration of two weeks. It was inevitable that some assignments had to fail within the set time frame. However, those assignments that were successful, have achieved benchmark standards.

### **Tangible outputs**

Material development and transformation in particular has managed to bring out tangible results. The 'Guidelines for Distance Writing', and the "House Style" referred to earlier, have been amended. Desk top publishing templates for lesson writing have become operational. A few course modules have been successfully written/transformed to serve a model role.



Several instruments for recurring research surveys have been adopted after pilot study. A fund for distance education research has been established at the university . An annual research journal, devoted to distance education research, has commenced publication. The inaugural volume was released in December 1997.

A proto-type of the MIS is complete.

Staff training, in the selected areas , has been extensive. Know-how and skills have been decentralised to departmental level.

### **The intangible outputs**

The intangible outputs of the project heavily outweigh the tangible. Awareness of the need for research into distance education is high. The attitudinal change to nurture a culture of distance education research, is in the author's view, a powerful achievement. This has been accompanied by policy changes to accept distance education research for career promotion of academic staff.

More importantly, a culture of quality assurance has been inculcated within the OUSL. It now remains to sustain these outcomes and to enhance a spiralling out effect.

### **Mid term review of progress**

The intangible outputs are not usually accepted as outcomes. This led to a bitter experience during the mid term review of progress. At the project formulation stage it was not expected that review of progress would adhere without flexibility to the verifiable indicators of output suggested in the project framework. This was specially so in the areas of research and material production. Both areas need long gestation to achieve outputs and as such could not deliver the promised quota of outputs for the mid term review. The fact that a culture of distance education was in place at the time of the mid term review was apparently, not acceptable as an output.

The inadequate level of development of the knowledge-based system (KBS) further aggravated this. It came under heavy criticism from the consultant appointed for mid term progress review as well as consultants for research. This cue was picked up strongly by the SEAD team who came for the mid

term review. It resurrected the traditional data base development with priority given to the MIS over the KBS.

Several project management practices were amended. On an OUSL request, SEAD gave approval for administrative staff training within the budget allocated for study tours and to provide frequent financial accounting of expenses incurred to OUSL. The premise of the OUSL was that financial information would be a tool for more effective utilisation of funds.

SEAD also agreed tentatively, to consider re-allocation of funds between project components on provision of acceptable justification.

Deliberations convinced the SEAD team, of a need to rephrase the verifiable indicators to include intangible outputs for the remaining project period.

The mid term review resulted in an aftermath of panic. The OUSL re-constituted the project monitoring team in its wake. In hindsight, these appear to have been unnecessary.

The British Council, Colombo appointed a consultant to carry out rephrasing of verifiable indicators. In the author's opinion, it brought about the shallowest point of collaborative initiative between the British Council and the OUSL. There was no consensus requested from OUSL on the suitability of the consultant. As was learnt during the rephrasing exercise, the consultant was not knowledgeable about distance education. The inputs from the OUSL team leaders however, salvaged what appeared to be a sensitive situation.

### **Post 'mid term review'**

Immediately after the mid term review, consolidation of activities, which had commenced prior to the mid term review continued. OUSL actively pursued a non project related development of a local area network within the campus premises. With this in place, the MIS would be able to provide on-line services. The focus of the OUSL rested therefore, on the possibility of re-allocating some of the funds from project components into network development. Deliberations on project activities became biased towards cost saving on a priority basis. Possible extension of the project without additional funds was also in contention, especially for the MIS development and the material production component. However, this appeared to be a costly misconception. SEAD was not in agreement to allocate money to a

totally new component, unforeseen at project formulation. Neither was it willing to give an extension beyond December 1998. It resulted in part of the fund allocation being unutilised.

## The future

Stepping beyond what has been achieved during the project period has much to do with mitigating constraints. The most crucial single factor that affected performance of project-type assignments was the availability of staff time. Quality in material and delivery has a prerequisite in quality staff. An important issue would be quality time management of staff. Staff time in the OUSL has been fashioned under the role model of conventional universities and there seems to be a mismatch between demand for staff time and the use pattern of time. It has become mandatory that a time management profile for a distance teacher be developed at OUSL. This has to take into account realistic time schedules for media integrated material development. Sharing time has to be a two way process, where the university apportions work with practical time frames and where the teacher must become accountable for such time with tangible outputs. The concept of multi skilling the distance teacher must find an amendment in this respect. The academic and academic support staff categories within the OUSL must find different 'niches' for optimising staff time. Their roles must be clearly different and defined where overlap of duties should be minimised. Training options may have to be re-adjusted in such a scenario, where core necessities and peripheral skills may be different.

The DfID project has succeeded in placing know-how and skill where necessary and instilled a culture conducive for distance education at the university. It has catalysed self searching within OUSL. The university Senate has begun a series of brain storming sessions based on training and experiences received, in search of ways to forge ahead. Yet, without a mandatory profile of time management for staff, the future of quality distance education delivery may remain a distant dream.

## References

- Black, Margaret. (1995) The definition of quality in a Post Fordist approach to distance education in *One World Many Voices*, Volume 2, International Council for Distance Education, OUUK, pp 37-40.
- Gunawardena, C., Arthenayake, N.R. and Weerasinghe, B. (1998) Quality Assurance at OUSL: A Collaborative Initiative, *Paper Presented at The Conference of Presidents of Open Universities on Quality Assurance for Distance Education*, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Bangkok, 9-13 November.
- Jayathilake, G.B., Lekamge, G.D. and Weerasinghe, B. (1977) Survey of Student Characteristics at the Open University: A Comparison with Conventional Universities, *OUSL Journal*, Vol. 1, pp63-82.
- Keegan, D. (1983). 'On defining distance education' in Stewart, D., Keegan, D., and Holmberg, B. (eds) *Distance Education: International Perspectives*, Croom Helm.
- Koul, B.N. (1993) A Case For Collaborative Research, *Media and Technology For Human Resource Development*, Vol.6, No.1, pp7-14.

## **Augmentation 1 - Research Advice**

Compiled by Team leader for Research Advice, Chandra Gunawardena.  
Edited by Project Manager, Buddhi Weerasinghe

### *Modus Operandi*

Research Advice was coded RUK3 and had five consultancy visits by an OUUK Consultant. They collaborated with the OUSL team for RUK3. Each consultancy was two to three weeks in duration. These short consultancies were consolidated by frequent dialogue between the Consultant and the RUK3 team via e-mail and fax, before and after each consultancy.

### *Need Analysis*

The OUUK Consultant carried out a situation audit in February 1996. This indicated several shortcomings that affected research capability into distance education at OUSL.

It revealed the absence of an explicit policy focused on the purpose, role and functioning of research and evaluation in distance education.

The situation audit also identified the need to train and upgrade research skills of staff who were expected to carry out research activities, especially in the areas of research methodology and statistical analysis. Additional need for the improvement of non-staff resources such as good communication facilities, data processing facilities, library and information resources, compilation of baseline data and funding came into focus. A change in the existing regulations was also deemed desirable so that recognition given to distance education research for promotions to senior academic positions could encourage and motivate staff to engage in distance education research.

The little ongoing research at the time of the situation audit, appeared to be conducted on an ad hoc basis. Further, no agreed structure for the organisation of distance education research and evaluation activity was in place. The necessity for a formal plan of action in research and evaluation to include initiation of research projects, their implementation, dissemination of research findings (in the form of research reports, abstracts, summaries, publications and formal presentations) came into sharp focus. The need for quality monitoring was identified. Perhaps the most important outcome of

this preliminary study was the need to establish a research environment conducive to the growth of research into distance education.

### *Achievements*

During the three years of the project duration, commendable progress has been achieved through a multi-pronged strategy to cater to these identified needs. Staff training was carried out locally under an OUUK Consultant. Several members of staff were exposed to overseas training.

Special mention must be made of the policy formulation necessary to inculcate a distance education research culture at the OUSL.

In October 1996, the Council of the Open University of Sri Lanka, on the recommendation of the Senate, accepted the following official Policy Statement on Distance Education Research.

'The Open University of Sri Lanka is committed to undertake continuing research on distance education to achieve its mission of increasing access to and success in adult learning at university level and to enhance the quality of equal opportunities for adult Sri Lankans. Distance education research is an indispensable tool in the OUSL's efforts towards excellence in teaching and scholarship while ensuring social equity.'

The Council also approved the recommendation to release staff for fifty percent (50%) of time, for a period of three months, to facilitate engagement in distance education research. A University Research Fund was established to provide resources needed for such research. A request by the University, for explicit recognition of distance education research/publications, in schemes of recruitment, (upto a maximum of fifty percent of the research requirement), was approved by the University Grants Commission.

The Core Research Unit in the Educational Technology Division was strengthened by the appointment of two lecturers and the University has requested for more academic cadre posts for the division.

It was also decided that until a full-pledged research and evaluation system is developed in the ET Division, monitoring of research into Distance Education be carried out by a Committee on Research Advice on Distance Education (CRADE).

The Senate also approved the launching of the OUSL Journal annually, to enable the findings of distance education research to be disseminated.

### *Unresolved constraints and the future*

Despite the initiatives taken, it is noted that the motivation for and engagement in distance education research by academic and academic support staff remain at an inadequate level. Policy formulation is yet to be exploited fully. It is disappointing to note that very few faculty members have requested to be released from their normal work to undertake research.

This partly stems from the high workload of staff members. Distance education entails much work related to administrative co-ordination of course-delivery and student support. It is the OUSL experience that much of this administrative work is thrust upon the academic and academic support staff.

The current freeze on academic and non-academic cadre provision to universities, imposed by the University Grants Commission, is aggravating this situation. The increased intake of students into several academic programmes without parallel enhancement of staff has added to the workload of academic staff. This invariably has had an adverse impact on research.

The University is at present, through several Senate Sub-Committees, attempting to specify the duties and responsibilities of different categories of OUSL staff. Whether this would help resolve the question of workload is to be seen yet.

A recommendation to allow OUSL staff to spend their sabbatical at the Educational Technology Division of OUSL, engaged in research, has been turned down by the University Grants Commission.

The recommendation to establish a Department of Institutional Research to accept direct responsibility for institutional research to facilitate administrative policy formulation has also not materialised.

The Educational Technology Division, which has been entrusted with the responsibility to provide research support, is itself faced with a shortage of qualified staff to fully support research initiatives, if the demand for such services increase in the near future.

Despite these constraints, one may be optimistic in the long term. The deep commitment to staff development at OUSL, currently under the initiative of the Educational Technology Division; with the completion of the Management Information System; accompanied by quality assurance endeavours at OUSL, should herald a better future for distance education research at OUSL.



## **Augmentation 2 – Survey Research**

Compiled by Team leader for Survey Research, M.G. Kularatne  
Edited by Project Manager, Buddhi Weerasinghe

### *Modus Operandi*

Survey Research was coded RUK2 and had five consultancy visits by an OUUK Consultant. They collaborated with the OUSL team for RUK2. Each consultancy was two to three weeks in duration. Short duration was consolidated by frequent dialogue between the Consultant and the RUK2 team via e-mail and fax, before and after each consultancy.

### *Need Analysis*

The OUUK Consultant carried out a situation audit in February 1996. Consequently, the overall need identified was the enhancement of research and evaluation capability of the academic staff at OUSL. To achieve this, the following objectives were set for achievement within the project period.

- Development of a set of standardised generic data collection instruments for repetitive use
- Initiation of several baseline surveys leading to generation of evaluative data relevant for improving the quality of distance education dissemination
- Training of an identified number of OUSL staff in evaluative research methodology to ensure the devolution of the following skills to all academic departments
  - Designing survey research
  - Instrument design
  - Sampling
  - Data coding and analysis
  - Research reporting
- Installation of adequate non-staff resources to support the training and survey initiatives.

### *Achievements*

The objectives set for the project period for RUK2 have been satisfactorily achieved. Nearly forty staff members underwent the scheduled training and were grouped to carry out six surveys in selected priority areas to gain hands-on experience.

These surveys were on

- Evaluation of study material
- Evaluation of face to face sessions and student participation
- Student performance
- Student support services
- Graduate perceptions of OUSL study programmes
- Employer perceptions of OUSL study programmes and graduate employees

Recommended computer facilities have been installed at the Educational Technology Division. Support staff were in employment during the project period on a contract basis.

Pre-pilot and pilot stages of these surveys have been completed and findings presented at research seminars. Main studies are under way at present.

The importance of collaboration between individuals of diverse academic backgrounds in undertaking evaluation research has emerged as an important lesson learnt.

Overseas training was also made available for selected staff members in survey research under the project sponsorship.

### *Unresolved constraints and the future*

Availability of staff time discussed under RUK3 above, has been the biggest constraint that needs resolution to achieve optimum impact of the capacity building in survey research that has been put in place at OUSL.

Survey activities and dissemination of their findings has helped to nurture a culture of survey research at OUSL. This needs to be strengthened and sustained. It is disappointing to note that the day to day pressure of work on academic and academic support staff has seemingly slackened the thrust achieved during the post-project period.

## **Augmentation 3 – Material Development**

Compiled by Team leader for Material Development, Ravindra Jayananda  
Edited by Project Manager, Buddhi Weerasinghe

### *Modus Operandi*

Material Development had two sub components. Material development proper was coded **MUK** while its support aspect of Desk Top Publishing was coded **DTP**. There were two OUSL teams initially to collaborate with the OUUK Consultants. Towards the end of project, the two sub components were amalgamated for convenience.

Two OUUK consultants undertook the DTP component. They carried out a joint consultancy for a situation audit initially; followed up by an individual consultancy each thereafter to conduct identified training.

An OUUK consultant also carried out the situation audit for MUK component. The training was taken over by another OUUK expert who followed up with five consultancies thereafter.

Each consultancy was two to three weeks in duration, except the ultimate for MUK, which was longer. Short duration was consolidated by frequent dialogue between the Consultant and the OUSL teams via e-mail and fax, before and after each consultancy.

### *Need Analysis*

The situation audit revealed many shortcomings in

- Material design
- Material development
- Material production and
- Quality assurance.

Staff training needs in the following areas were identified.

- Characteristics of good teaching material
- Methodology of course development
- Design and layout to increase readability
- Desktop publishing
- Co-ordinated planning and scheduling of material production

The situation audit also recognised the need for decentralised availability of DTP equipment, a necessity to enhance the quality of printing paper as well as defined facilities at the university press.

### *Achievements*

#### Staff Training

Recommended DTP facilities were installed at Faculty as well as departmental level and in the Educational Technology Division.

One OUUK consultancy was devoted to a training workshop on layout and design where sixteen members of staff underwent training for two weeks. Another was devoted to DTP, where thirty-five staff members underwent initial training. From them, a 'core' team of sixteen members was selected for 'training as trainers'. The core team developed templates for OUSL print material at the end of their training and was made responsible for their maintenance at the three Faculties of study. The core team thereafter extended DTP expertise by holding several in-house workshops for academic and academic support staff as well as data entry personnel at OUSL.

Five consultancies were devoted to the training of nearly one hundred academics from fifteen academic departments in the design and development of instructional material.

The trainees were grouped into teams and were given project work for development/transformation of instructional material to provide 'hands-on' training. These achieved varying degrees of success by the end of the project period.

Overseas staff training was also made available for several selected members of staff under project sponsorship.

#### Quality Assurance

The end result was the decentralisation of material design and development skills to individual departmental level. The quality assurance mechanism was to operate through Faculty Course Development Committees monitored by a University Course Development Committee. The Educational Technology Division was expected to provide support and facilitation in these endeavours.

Two manuals prepared by the Educational Technology Division prior to the commencement of the project were revised to complement the material development process and templates put in place as project outcomes. *Bridging the Gap* provides guidelines to distance writing. The *House Style* provides guidelines to page format and lay out of OUSL print material

#### Material Production

Faculty Master Plans for material production have now been drawn up and they are in the process of being integrated into a University Master Plan. This no doubt would assist in co-ordinated planning of material production.

The University Press has been provided with the recommended equipment to upgrade its facilities. A development initiative outside the ODA project has provided the Press with a new housing complex to improve the working environment.

#### *Unresolved constraints and the future*

As in other project components, availability of staff time has been a major constraint to reap full potential of the training initiatives. The new methodology adopted, demand greater time inputs by course developers and necessarily demands a longer gestation period for completion. Although the University strives to develop a Master Plan for material production, the current realities of staff shortages and pressure to launch new courses and study programmes would certainly test this resolve.

It is imperative to find an answer to its constraint of 'staff time availability' quickly, if it is to maximise the benefits of project inputs.

## **Augmentation 4 – Course Administration and Student Support**

Compiled by Team leader for Material Development, Nilanthi Jayasinghe  
Edited by Project Manager, Buddhi Weerasinghe

### *Modus Operandi*

Both aspects, Course Administration and Student Support, were amalgamated in to a single situation audit of two weeks duration. An OUUK Consultant carried it out. There was considerable dialogue between the OUSL team for this component and the Consultant before and after the consultancy. The Project Monitoring Committee deliberated on the large number of recommendations submitted by the Consultant and decided to implement part of them in-house without outside assistance. No further consultancies were therefore commissioned for this component.

### *Need Analysis*

The many desirable improvements identified by the Consultant may be grouped into four key areas. They were

- Decentralisation of the academic and administrative structure to the regions
- Assignment marking process
- Orientation/induction of students to the distance mode
- Streamlining examination procedures

### *Achievements*

Due to the historical perspective of its growth, resources available and limited cadre provisions, the academic and administrative structure was centralised in Colombo, the capital city. This was more evident in areas that demanded laboratory resources.

The university has however made a committed effort to improve the situation. Reasonable strengthening of academic activities and student counselling in the regions has been achieved. These would be enhanced as and when cadre provisions and funding resources are made available. Computer facilities have been made more accessible. Expansion of

infrastructure facilities at existing regional and study centres as well as opening new centres have been incorporated into a Master Plan and partly achieved within the limited resources available.

The question of handling assignments, marking, quick return to students and monitoring of these processes are currently receiving serious study and attention. The recruitment of external tutors from the regions, training, and assignment marking under supervision are on the increase in all three Faculties. These demand new thinking, attitudinal change and concentrated inputs from academic and administrative staff in Colombo and in the regions. A process which would take time to reach an optimal level, given the constraints that can be encountered within a developing country scenario.

The Educational Technology Division has already prepared a guide to distance learning titled "OUSL Student's Guide" which is issued to new students. Several video programmes are also available which deal with several aspects of distance studying.

Each Faculty has produced a video programme for student orientation customised to each Faculty, which is shown to new students at registration.

Further orientation aids are being planned at present.

A University Senate Sub-Committee after extensive consultation has compiled a 'Manual of Examination Procedures' which is implemented with effect from July 1998.

The progress may be slow from the yardstick of a developed country such as UK. However it may be considered satisfactory within resource constraints encountered in the Sri Lankan scenario.