COL consultant's evaluation report on the Sri Lanka University Grants Commission External Degrees Retreat held at the Triton Hotel, Ahungalla, Sri Lanka from 22 –24 September 2004.

Background to the Retreat

In 2001 preliminary discussions took place between Professor B.R.R.N. Mendis, Chairman of the UGC of Sri Lanka, and Professor G. Dhanarajan, President of COL, about the status of external degree provision in Sri Lankan universities. As a result, COL was requested to provide technical advice to the UGC on what measures could be taken to improve the quality and efficiency of external degree provision in Sri Lanka through the use of Open and Distance Learning as part of a larger government initiative to increase access to quality higher education in the country.

It was agreed that COL would provide an expert consultant to investigate the current situation of external degrees provision in Sri Lankan universities and to report to the UGC so that they might identify where intervention on their part would be the most useful. After production of the consultant's report, COL would organize and run a retreat/workshop for the Vice-Chancellors of the relevant universities and their chief administrators of external studies to discuss key issues pertaining to off-campus education and to consider organizational/institutional changes needed to provide an improved service to students.

According to the original schedule, the consultancy visit was to be conducted in August 2001. However, the unstable political situation in Sri Lanka at that time caused the visit to be postponed to February/March 2002. The UGC organized a First (internal) workshop on External Degree Programmes in August 2001 from which preliminary data about the external degree programmes was generated and sent to the consultant, Dr Anthony R. (Tony) Kaye. A second workshop, facilitated by the consultant, was held on February 25th 2002, and resulted in the adoption of a number of recommendations for the reform of external degree provision (List of recommendations of the second External Degrees workshop at **Appendix 1**).

It was originally agreed that the Third Workshop on External degrees (to discuss the consultant's findings) would be held in May 2002 facilitated by Tony Kaye and Greville Rumble of the UKOU.

In his proposal for the Third Retreat, Tony Kaye stated:

> At the moment, I believe that the External Degree system serves, in the main, to reinforce the *feelings of failure and inadequacy* amongst the many thousands of capable and motivated youngsters who qualify each year for university entry but have not received good enough marks to enter full-time University study. And even for a significant proportion of the 20% - 30% who manage to obtain external degrees, there is no guarantee of employment concomitant with their qualifications, because the subjects they have studied often do not correspond to market needs. It is surely totally unacceptable, both at a personal and a societal level, that a system which is creating dissatisfaction, disappointment, and frustration amongst such a large group of people (an estimated 166,000 currently registered external students) should continue in its present form. As one of the participants at the *Second Workshop on External Degrees* said so

evocatively:*"....how can you prepare a quality product with broken machinery? You need to replace the machinery"*.

The aim of the *Third Workshop* is to help design a blueprint for this new 'machinery'.

Unfortunately in 2002, the UGC postponed the planned retreat and it was not until early August 2004 that they again contacted COL with a plan to run the postponed workshop in September 2004 in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the UGC. As neither Tony Kaye nor Greville Rumble was available at such short notice, COL contracted Andrea Hope, its former Education Specialist (Higher Education) who had been responsible for establishing and monitoring the original project, to facilitate the workshop together with Professor Asha Kanwar, COL's current Education Specialist (Higher Education).

Preparation for the Retreat
In preparation for the Retreat, COL and the UGC provided the facilitator with:
- Tony Kaye's report of March 2002, "The Current Situation of External Degrees in Sri Lanka".
- "28-point program for Restructuring Humanities and Social Sciences Education in the Universities" UGC of Sri Lanka Standing Committee on Humanities and Social Sciences, June 2002.
- "Proposal for Reorganisation of the External Programmes" Prof K Tillekeratne, VC, University of Kelaniya, July 2004.
- Open University of Sri Lanka Vice-Chancellor's Report, August 2004.

Retreat Overview
The Timetable of the Retreat was agreed in consultation with the UGC and is attached at **Appendix 2** to the Report.

The List of Participants is attached at **Appendix 3**.

It should be noted that at the time of the workshop a strike of all non-academic staff in universities had been going on for two months. A resolution was reached on 23 September and workers were due to return to work on Friday 24 September. Some particpants were unable to attend the workshop or were obliged to leave early in order to tend to urgent university business related to the strike and the return to work.

The 3-day retreat format provided ample opportunities for informal interaction outside the formal workshop sessions. Such networking was particularly valued by the participants in the workshop.

Aims of the Retreat
1. Convene key institutional stakeholders for in-depth discussion on status of External Degrees.
2. Share information about current practice, highlighting particular successes.
3. Discuss key issues and challenges.
4. Make recommendations to improve access, reduce costs, enhance quality and relevance of External Degree Programmes.

Higher Education in Sri Lanka

Presentations from Professor Mendis, Professor Senake Bandaranayaka, Chairman of the Standing Committee on Distance Education and External Degrees, Professor Uma Coomaraswamy, Vice Chancellor of the Open University, Prof K Tillekaratne, Chairman of the Committee of Vice Chancellors, and a message from Dr Tara de Mel, Secretary Ministry of Education, provided up to date information on the background to the current initiative.

The picture presented is one where only 2.3% of the age cohort gains a full-time university place. The huge unfulfilled demand for higher education and the poor quality and reputation of external degrees is fuelling an organic growth in private education outside the state system catering to 18 – 23 year olds. Denied access to a free university place, students and their families are prepared to pay in order to obtain a qualification which will act as their passport to job opportunities upon graduation. All the statistics demonstrate an urgent need to extend the outreach of the existing universities and to improve the quality of the external degrees on offer.

While the on-campus degree programmes have moved to a modular semesterised credit based system which promotes flexibility of degree programme composition and opens up the possibility of credit transfer and student mobility, the curriculum and examinations of External degrees have not been revised, with the result that they do not respond to the needs of the students who are obliged to register on them for the development of lifelong learning skills as well as the acquisition of knowledge.

While Internet connectivity is readily available to students in Colombo, access to high speed internet connections is a major problem for students in remoter parts of the country. One significant development that will revolutionise the technological capacity of the entire university sector in Sri Lanka in the next few years is a US$60 million national project funded by an ADB loan that will modernise distance education so as to boost enrollment and improve the quality and relevance of HE provision. The Project's main goals are:

1. Increase opportunities for A-level completers to gain admission to higher education and training through distance education in all provinces of Sri Lanka and to a greater number of the country's 20 million citizens;

2. Improve internal and external efficiencies of higher education institutions practicing distance learning mode through the improved quality, autonomy, accessibility and sustainability of a demand driven tertiary education system;

3. Through the establishment of a modern ICT network linking the 26 regional and study centers of OUSL under the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Training and any other Public and Private Sector Institutions that wish to join the network (Distance Education Network), the project will target A/L completers who do not get entry to the traditional 12 universities annually and enable them to receive education in any part of the country.

External Degree Provision

In advance of the workshop a questionnaire had been circulated to all participating universities by the UGC to gather current statistics on External Degree provision. The responses had enabled the UGC to identify problems and issues as well as some examples of good practice which were then shared at the retreat in a session dedicated to presentations from participants.

Common problems included long delays in marking examinations, lack of job opportunities for graduates of External Degree programmes, lack of learner support, low pass rates, reluctance of full-time staff to devote time to External Degree students and irrelevant outdated curricula. External programmes at Jaffna University had been particularly badly affected by the recent hostilities.

The Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) programme offered by the University of Colombo School of Computing (UCSC) was identified as a model of good practice as it provides detailed syllabus information to students; offers learner support through a Learning Management System and annual seminars by full time staff; provides training to private tutorial centers teaching towards the BIT; evaluates their effectiveness based on the success rates of students in the BIT examinations and publishes the results of the effectiveness surveys to students.

At Eastern University, the external degree syllabus had been revised in line with the full-time programme to be semester based and course materials had been produced for use by internal and external students. Seminars are organized for external students.

Other universities including Peradeniya and Kelaniya and Ruhuna had recognized the need for reform and were proposing such measures as limiting student numbers, introducing new subjects and imposing time frames for completion of external degree studies (Peradeniya), introducing a credit-based external degree system that would provide recognition for graduates within the proposed national qualifications framework and providing self-instructional materials (Kelaniya) and revising and updating syllabi, introducing innovative combined degree programmes to improve the marketability of graduates and complementing the efforts of outside tutorial agencies by providing annual seminars (Ruhuna). One of the objectives of the workshop was identify ways in which existing good practice could be built on and adapted for use throughout the system.

Keynote presentations
Two Presentations from Prof Asha Kanwar on Quality Assurance in Distance Education and the Introduction of Dual Mode education in conventional universities gave an overview of the latest international developments with particular reference to dual mode institutions.

Andrea Hope's keynote on Flexible Learning explored international developments in the use of distance education to expand access to educational opportunities in face to face and dual-mode universities.

Themes for discussion
The themes for discussion were agreed in advance with the UGC.
- Curriculum
- Assessment and evaluation
- Learning resources
- Learner support
- Training needs
- Institutional policy
- Recognition and transfer of credits

- Institutional collaboration
- Quality Assurance

Structure of the working sessions

In order to facilitate discussion of the large agenda, participants were divided into three groups and each group was given one of the above topics to discuss in each of three 45 minute working sessions. The groups then presented their findings and recommendations in a plenary session. The consolidated recommendations were adopted in a final plenary session and an Action Plan defined.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum
- Curriculum of external degrees should be designed so that graduates are employable.
- Learning outcomes should be defined and these should precede and inform the definition of a syllabus for a programme.
- Labour market information system (to be made available under ADB/DEMP) to be made use of in making decisions about introduction of new and innovative programmes.
- Subject Committees of the UGC to play a leading role in decision making on curriculum definition.
- All programmes should combine knowledge acquisition and development of soft skills (eg. communication skills, IT literacy, critical thinking etc.)
- Institutions should strive for alignment of internal and external degrees where possible.

Assessment and Evaluation
- Conference marking to be practiced in order to speed up and control the examination marking process.
- Higher financial incentives to be given for examiners. However, strict performance requirements should be invoked.
- All final examinations should be subject to compulsory (external) moderation.
- Continuous Assessment to be introduced whenever possible.
- Examination Process to be regularly monitored and evaluated.

Learning Resources
- Collaborative development and delivery to be used to offset high development costs of user-friendly course material.
- Course materials made widely available through placement in public libraries and in other available study centres.
- Appropriate use of a range of technological resources for the delivery of programmes.
- Use of OUSL and other Universities' course materials, expertise and other available resources wherever possible.

Learner Support
- Within each institution, benchmark standards to be established for all areas of support viz. study hours of course material, face-to-face activities, library access, exam preparation etc. and published to students.

- Institutions to consider establishing a new Department or expanding existing External Examinations Unit to cater to off-campus student needs.
- Provision of information to students through Newsletters, hotline services, etc.
- Where learner support is outsourced, non-university educational institutions teaching External Degree Programmes to be evaluated by the University (eg. BIT Model) and students to be provided with information on such institutions and their success rates.
- Shared use of existing facilities to provide outreach to External Degree students (eg. OUSL Centres).
- Student tracking mechanisms to verify successful implementation of dual-mode provision.

Staff Training Needs
- Conduct training needs analysis of staff involved in external degree programmes.
- Provide regular inter-institutional discussion forums to share experience.
- Create a support network for staff who are interested in developing the use of technology in teaching for both on and off-campus students.
- Collaborate with other institutions/agencies to meet training needs.
- Develop training standards.
- Recognise preparation of course materials for External Degree Programmes towards promotion.

Institutional Policy
- Institutional Policy is a matter for each university to decide within the constraints of government policy transmitted by circular from the UGC.
- Commit to increase access to quality education.
- Adopt dual mode provision.
- If dual mode provision is adopted, institutions will need to review and revise their policies to permit it.
- Organizational structures to be revised accordingly.
- Annual registration of external degree students.
- Collaborative development and delivery of programmes (eg. As proposed for Economics).

Recognition and Transfer of Credits
- Modularization of programmes to be pursued.
- Modularization to enable transfer of credits and national credit accumulation.
- Faculties to play a key role in the determination of transfer of credits within nationally agreed guidelines.
- Need for clear information to students about eligibility for credit transfer.

Institutional Collaboration
- Collaboration between institutions nationally and internationally to be encouraged wherever possible to maximize use of expertise and scarce resources.
- Regular inter-institutional discussion forums to share expertise and information.
- Common credit currency to facilitate collaboration and to encourage student mobility.

- Establishment of a central agency or Centre for External Degree Programmes as a facilitating agency/centre set up under the UGC by the universities offering External Degree Programmes.

Quality Assurance
- Performance indicators to be developed, eg. for enrollment, examination marking, graduate output, completion time frame.
- National Quality Assurance Committee to define quality parameters of External Degree Programmes.
- Quality Assurance guidelines for Open and Distance Learning to be formulated at COL/OUSL Workshop in March 2005 to be examined by the Universities for use in their External Degree Programmes.

ACTION PLAN

Institutional consultation
- Circulate the recommendations to each of the participating universities for ratification.
- UGC to consider the implications for the revised Universities Act of the recommendations on External Degrees.

Credit Transfer
- Invite Prof Tillekaratne to prepare a memo on Credit Transfer for External Degrees to be considered at the Standing Committee on DE and External Degree programmes.
- Credit Transfer proposals to be considered by the UGC and a circular to be issued to the universities.

Payment for academic staff for participation in External Degree marking
- UGC Circular to be finalised and issued to the universities (Dr Sarat Amunugama and Mr Dharmadasa to assist in the finalisation of the circular).

Centre for External Degree programmes
- Establish a national Centre for External Degrees to establish best practice and act as a resource for all universities and a source of reliable information for prospective students.

Database
- Establish a good database in each of the universities having external degree programmes and in the proposed Centre for External Degree programmes.

Conclusions
Ten universities were represented at the Retreat. Eight Vice Chancellors attended as well as five members of the UGC. Among the Vice Chancellors present were Prof Senake Bandaranayake, Chair of the Standing Committee on DE and External Degrees and Prof K Tillekaratne, Chair of the Committee of Vice Chancellors who is also the Coordinator of the Quality Assurance Working Group. The Retreat therefore provided an excellent opportunity for inter-institutional sharing. The UGC will use the Retreat and this report as a basis for developing its own report and action plan.

External Degrees have long been the poor relation in Higher Education in Sri Lanka. Earlier efforts at reform have foundered on lack of resources and a lack of incentive to change the status quo. The rise of private education in Sri Lanka offering more job-related programmes of study has led to falling roles in External Degree programmes. The ADB project on Distance Education specifically includes the reform of External Degree provision as part of its brief to improve access to quality education facilities in the country.

The Open University of Sri Lanka will benefit from US$18 million under the ADB project to enhance its study center network. The availability of OUSL resources for use by other institutions and improved connectivity throughout the country provide an excellent opportunity for reform and improvement.

It is clear that it will not be easy to affect change. As Tony Kaye noted in his report, the deficiencies in the system were recognized as early as 1978. Universities treasure their traditional autonomy and without sufficient incentives may be reluctant to deploy significant internal resources to upgrade external degree provision, which they may perceive as secondary to their main mission. There is also strong opposition from full-time on campus learners to sharing scarce learning resources with their off-campus counterparts. However, the following new factors provide grounds for optimism that at least some of the universities represented at the Retreat will be both willing and able under the guidance of the UGC to take up the challenge of delivering on both access and quality goals in their external degree provision in future:

- the availability of funding through the ADB project;
- the possibility of collaborative course development and delivery;
- the option of utilizing the technologically enhanced facilities of the OUSL's study centre network to provide access for remote students to on-line learning resources as well as tutorial support.

Indicators that they have been successful will include:
- introduction of diversified employment-oriented degree programmes,
- increased application and registration in external degree programmes,
- reliable data on student registration and status,
- improved examination result turnaround time,
- better overall completion rates,
- decreased time to graduation,
- improved graduate employment statistics,
- consistently high student, graduate and other stakeholder satisfaction ratings.

Andrea Hope
15 October 2004

Recommendations of the Second workshop on External Degrees (February 2002)

1. Each University should decide a prioritised list of subjects on the basis of academic strengths and the demand for them.

2. Study material should be provided through public libraries.

3. External students should be cared for and recognised.

4. Resource personnel to support external programmes should be drawn from all the universities.

5. Required legislative amendments should be sent by the Universities to the UGC for consideration.

6. The trainers (those in the relevant University departments, and those tutoring external students) should be trained.

7. Attempts should be made to create an efficient and effective academic support system.

8. Universities should draw up proposals to establish the External Units as cost centres.

9. The possibilities of using radio and TV should be explored.

10. Data bases of external candidates should be maintained.

11. Students should be re-registered annually.

12. The examination system should be re-structured so as to evaluate students' work objectively and release the results rapidly.

PROGRAMME
Day 1

22nd September 2004, Wednesday

4.00 p.m.	Registration & Tea

Inaugural Session (Chair- Prof B. R. R. N. Mendis)

4.30 p.m.	Lighting of Traditional Oil Lamp National Anthem
4.35 p.m.	Welcome Address & Introduction to the Workshop Prof. B.R.R.N. Mendis, Chairman/UGC
5.00 p.m.	Address by Prof Senake Bandaranayake Chairman/Standing Committee on Distance Education & External Degrees: Key Issues Pertaining to off Campus Education
5.15 p.m.	Address by Prof. Asha Kanwar: Quality assurance in Distance Education
5.45 p.m.	Message from Dr. Tara de Mel: Secretary, Ministry of Education
5.50 p.m.	Address by Prof. Uma Coomaraswamy: Distance Education in Sri Lanka
6.20 p.m.	Address by Prof. K. Thilakaratne, Chairman, Committee of Vice Chancellors & Directors
6.30 p.m.	Keynote Address by Ms. Andrea Hope: Flexible Learning
8.20 p.m.	*Fellowship & Dinner*

Dress Code : Smart Casual

Day 2

23rd September 2004, Thursday

Session 1 (Chair – Prof. Uma Coomaraswamy)

9.00 a.m	Retreat overview by Ms. Andrea Hope
9.10 a.m.	Overview/ Consultation on COL's 3-year Plan by Prof. Asha Kanwar
10.15 a.m.	*Tea*

Session 2 (Chair – Prof. Senake Bandaranayake)

10.30 a.m.	Presentation by Directors/ Academic Coordinators of External Degree Programs
	Discussion Summary of Issues
1.30 p.m.	*Lunch*

Session 3 (Chair – Prof. L. L. Ratnayake)

2.30 p.m.	Working Groups: (Parallel Sessions) **Group A** – Curriculum **Group B** – Assessment & Evaluation **Group C** – Learning Resources
	Plenary for Presentations of Group Work Discussion
4.00 p.m	*Tea*

Session 4 (Chair – Prof. Thilak Hettiarachchi)

4.15 p.m.	Working Groups: (Parallel Sessions) **Group A** – Learner Support **Group B** – Training Needs **Group C** – Institutional Policy
	Plenary for Presentations of Group Work Discussion
8.00 p.m.	*Formal Dinner*

Dress Code: Smart Casual

Day 3

24th September 2004, Friday

Session 5 (Chair – Prof. K. Thilakaratne)

9.00 a.m.   Working Groups : (Parallel Sessions)
                 Group A – Recognition & Transfer of Credits
                 Group B – Institutional Collaboration
                 Group C – Quality Assurance

10.30 a.m.   *Tea*

Session 6 (Chair – Prof. B. R. R. N. Mendis)

10.45 a.m.   Introducing Distance Education in Conventional
                 Universities by Prof. Asha Kanwar

11.45 p.m.   Finalization and Adoption of Recommendations by
                 Ms. Andrea Hope

12.15 p.m.   Decisions & Follow-up action by Prof. Senake
                 Bandaranayake /Prof. B. R. R. N. Mendis

1.00 p.m.   Lunch & End of Workshop
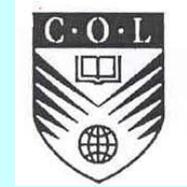
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University Grants Commission

In Collaboration with

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**1978 – 2003
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**3rd Workshop on External Degree Programmes
&
Distance Education**

**22.09.2004 4.00 p.m.
to
24.09.2004 2.00 p.m.**

Venue : Hotel Triton, Ahungalle

Participants of the Workshop on
External Degree Programmes
22 – 24 September 2004

1. Prof. Asha Kanwar

2. Prof. Andrea Hope

3. Prof. B.R.R.N. Mendis

4. Prof. L.L. Ratnayake

5. Prof. Senake Bandaranayake

6. Prof. Carlo Fonseka

7. Prof. S. Rathnajeewan H. Hoole

8. Mr. K.G.T.L. Nandasena, Secretary, UGC

9. Dr. D.C. Jayeratne, Snr.Asst. Secretary/ICD

10. Miss. D. Jayasinghe, Rapporteur

11. Miss. M. Manjula, Technical Officer

12. Prof. Thilak Hettiarachchi, University of Colombo

13. Dr. J.C.N. Rajendra, Eastern University (Actg. V.C.)

14. Prof. Ranjith Amarasinghe. Chairman,CVCD

15. Prof. S. Mohanadas, University of Jaffna

16. Dr. S.T.B. Rajeswaran, University of Jaffna

17. Prof. K. Thilakaratne, University of Kelaniya

18. Dr. Ajith Madurapperpuma, University of Moratuwa.

19. Prof. Uma Coomaraswamy, Open University of Sri Lanka

20. Prof. S.H. Upasena, Rajarata University

21. Prof. Ranjith Senaratne, University of Ruhuna

22. Prof. Chandima Wijebandara,

23. Dr. S.N. Wickramaratne, University of Peradeniya

24. Dr. Palitha Pathberiya, University of Peradeniya

25. Prof. Sarath Amarasinghe, University of Ruhuna

26. Dr. (Ms.) Gayathri Jayatilake, Open University

27. Mrs. G.I. Gamage, University of Colombo School of Computing
28. Dr. S.T.B. Rajeswaran, University of Jaffna
29. Dr. Sarath Amunugama, University of Kelaniya
30. Mrs. A. Murugathas, Eastern University
31. Mr. V. Kanagasingham, Eastern University
32. Dr. H.C.M. Fonseka, Open University
33. Mr. E.A. Dharmadasa, University of Jayewardenepura
34. Dr. Visaka Dissanayake