

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF EXTERNAL DEGREES IN SRI LANKA

*A personal assessment based on a visit to Sri Lanka,
February 17th – March 8th, 2002*

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DEDICATION

Miss X

Miss X, at the age of 21, enrolled on an External BA degree; although qualified for University entry, she had not gained high enough A/L marks to be accepted as a full-time internal student. She paid her registration fee and other initial fees (Rs 1200 in total), and received from the University a Student Handbook (with administrative information, subject options, exam regulations etc), a three page outline Syllabus for each exam, an External Student Record Book, and the right to sit her exams at the end of each year (after paying examination fees totalling Rs 2100). She received nothing else from the University.

She enrolled in tutorial classes for the BA, in a Pirivena, for which she paid a Rs 200 registration fee, followed by a monthly fee of Rs 350. She attended classes every weekend, involving 4 hours of tutorials per subject (12 hours each weekend); each 'tutorial' class was a lecture during which she took down the notes dictated by the tutor. There were 30 students altogether in her group for this BA Programme, with an age range of 21 years to around 45 years. In the breaks between lectures, she was able to discuss what the lecturer had said with the others in the group. She travelled 25 km each way on the bus each Saturday and Sunday to go to these classes, some of which were given by lecturers from the University in charge of the External Degree Programme. The lecturers were paid out of the fees received. During the week, she studied on her own in the local library, reading some of the textbooks recommended by her tutors.

After three years of study, she sat the final exams in December 2000. One year later, she and 5 others (out of the group of 30) were notified that they had passed the exam and had obtained a degree. She had received grades of B, B, and C respectively in her three subjects (Sociology, Communication, and Sinhala). Fourteen months after sitting the final exams, she is still waiting for her Degree Certificate. In the meantime she is working as a temporary filing clerk for a daily wage of Rs 150.

Despite the arduous experience of being an external student for three years, and the cost (a total of around Rs 12,000 for university fees plus tuition fees) she is pleased, even grateful, to have had the opportunity to obtain a degree.

This report is dedicated to Miss X and the 166,000 or so other students registered for External Degrees. She was one of the lucky minority who passed her exams and received a degree after only three years of arduous study. Many others have not been so fortunate.....

1 SUMMARY

1.1 This report is a personal assessment of the current situation regarding External Degrees in Sri Lanka, based on a fact-finding visit carried out on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the Sri Lankan University Grants Commission (UGC) in February / March 2002. It is to be used as a briefing document for a *Third Workshop on External Degrees* to be held in Sri Lanka in May this year.

1.2 It is estimated that there are about 166,000 people currently registered for External Degrees in the country. They are drawn from the large numbers of those whose A/L marks, although qualifying them for University entry, are not high enough to gain admittance to a full-time campus-based course (of the 73,347 candidates who sat the A/L examinations for the academic year 1999/2000, only 12,500, i.e. 17% of those qualified for entry, were admitted to full-time higher education).

1.3 Six Universities and one Institute register students for External Degrees. In general, very little guidance, teaching, or support is provided by the Universities for their external students; in the main (there are a few exceptions) the students have to rely on the services of unregulated private institutes and 'tutories' for teaching support. The University units responsible for external degrees are called *Examinations Units*, and, historically and currently, see their primary role as being to register students for the degrees and examinations, conduct the examinations, and collect the corresponding fees. In fact, these Units have been characterised by one senior Sri Lankan academic as functioning purely as "...*money-making units of the University*".

1.4 Traditionally, the most popular External Degree is a *BA*, offered by several Universities; however, successful graduation with a *BA* is no guarantee of obtaining employment. More recent programmes (eg a *B.Sc. in Business Administration*, and a *Bachelor of Information Technology*) are more clearly linked to market needs.

1.5 Although it is difficult to obtain accurate figures, the overall success rates of students registered on External Degrees is far, far lower than the corresponding ones for internal students, and there is evidence of very high attrition rates. In addition, inordinate delays (of up to two years or more) frequently occur in the marking of papers and in the release of results.

1.5 Concern has been expressed about the academic standards of some External Degrees, and about their equivalence to the corresponding full-time degree courses. Major curricular reforms (credit and semester systems, modularisation, continuous assessment...), are currently underway in the full-time system, and these will have serious implications for the future development of any corresponding external programmes.

1.6 Concerns over the External Degree system are not new; in 1978, for example, a report by the Director of the External Services Agency identified very similar problems to those being expressed now – particularly the lack of any proper academic

support services for students. Twenty-five years later on, the situation (with one or two exceptions) can hardly be said to have improved – and has worsened considerably in scale, with 166,000 external students now as opposed to the 9,000 or so in 1978.

1.7 There seems to be general agreement about *what* needs to be done to improve the situation, and various measures concerning student progress, programmes and curricula, learning materials, support services, and budgetary and organisational issues, are proposed in *Section 5* of this report. However, it is difficult to see *how* any major improvements in providing appropriate learning experiences and support for external students can be achieved without a radical re-structuring, and appropriate funding, of the entire system

1.8 On a more positive note, a number of factors suggest that the opportunity now exists for this major re-design of the External Degree system to be initiated:

- o the curricular reforms introduced in the full-time University system must, of necessity, lead to a re-thinking of the design and support of any 'equivalent' External Degrees
- o the proposals for a Sri Lankan credit transfer scheme currently being discussed should open up opportunities for a more flexible overall higher education provision, encouraging student mobility between full-time courses, distance courses at the Open University, External Degrees, and Extension courses
- o the *Bachelor of Information Technology* external degree launched very successfully last year by the Institute of Computer Technology (ICT) at the University of Colombo has demonstrated that it is possible, in conjunction with the private sector, to run a properly supported external programme
- o the Open University of Sri Lanka is able to provide human and technical resources (including media production and regional resource centres) to help in the development of learning materials and deployment of support services for external students.

1.9 On the basis of the analysis presented in this Report, and in the hope of helping to progress ideas for the necessary reform of the system, five main themes (*Section 6*) are suggested for consideration at the *Third Workshop on External Degrees*:

- o identification of priority curricular areas (employment-linked) and programme structures (including Certificate and Diploma courses) for external studies
- o the design of quality assurance procedures for monitoring the standards of External Degrees, Diplomas, and Certificates
- o identification of minimum standards and norms for levels of support (learning materials, tuition, assessment, private sector institutes...) for external students, and procedures for their enforcement
- o inter-institutional collaboration in the development of learning materials and support services for external students, including the shared use of regional educational resource centres and libraries
- o identification of the functions which are best centralised, and those best devolved, in a future organisational re-structuring of the External Degree system.

2 TERMS OF REFERENCE

2.1 The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), at the invitation of the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka, is supporting the development of distance and flexible education by providing technical assistance to improve the external degree programmes offered by universities in the country.

2.2 The terms of reference given by COL for the initial phase of this project define two main activities to be carried out with COL's participation:

Activity 1: to investigate the current situation (of external studies provision in Sri Lankan Universities and Colleges) and to report to the UGC so that they may identify areas where intervention (on their part) will be most useful;

Activity 2: to organise and run a retreat / workshop for the Vice-Chancellors of the relevant universities and their chief administrators of external studies, to discuss the key issues pertaining to off-campus education, and to consider organisational/ institutional changes needed to provide an improved service to students.

2.3 This investigative, fact-finding, report, based on a visit to Sri Lanka between February 16th - March 8th 2002, is the result of the first of these two activities; the original terms of reference given to me by COL, as their consultant, were to:

- o conduct site visits to selected universities to be determined by the UGC, accompanied, when possible, by Professor K.D. Arulpragasam, Chairman of the UGC *Standing Committee on External Degrees and Distance Education*.
- o survey the current provision of External Degree programmes in selected universities to be determined by the UGC. The list of universities may include the University of Peradeniya, the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, the University of Kelaniya and the University of Colombo Institute of Computer Technology.
- o meet with the UGC *Standing Committee on External Degrees and Distance Education* to discuss the project.
- o visit the campus of the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) for discussions relating to dedicated distance education provision in Sri Lanka and to consider opportunities for collaboration between dedicated providers of distance education and dual mode institutions

2.4 The UGC further refined the focus of my visit as helping to '*re-vamp the external degree programmes in Sri Lankan Universities*'¹ by:

- o carrying out an overall personal assessment of the External Degree situation
- o identifying particular areas for priority action
- o advising on provision of services to the large numbers of registered students

¹ letter from Professor Mendis of February 13th, 2002, and subsequent discussions

- o advising on the use of modern information technology and distance education in the conduct of the external programmes
- o working on modalities for the establishment and functioning of an Examination Syndicate for all external students.

2.5 I was told that a re-structuring of the overall External Degree Programme is seen as a major contribution to the rapid implementation of University Reforms, through the massification of quality higher education. Expansion and improvement of support services for external students is seen as the most efficient and productive means by which university education can be offered to the largest possible numbers of youth, through concentrating on courses that lead to employment.

2.6 This report is based on the site visits and meetings above (see *Appendix 2*), and is framed by the context provided to me by the UGC. The report indicates key areas where intervention on the part of the UGC (with support from COL and possibly other agencies), will be most useful in achieving their objective of providing an improved service delivery to students registering for External Degrees (see the Suggestions in *Section 5*).

2.7 The report will be used as a discussion paper for the 2 day retreat / workshop (*Activity 2* above) to be held in May this year. The Vice-Chancellors of all 13 Universities, and the Directors / Coordinators of the External Examinations Units of the Universities offering External Degrees will be invited, to discuss key policy and implementation issues relating to reform of the External Degree system. In the original brief from COL, workshop participants are expected to discuss the quality, relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of External Degree provision, and to make recommendations for organisational/ institutional changes needed at departmental, institutional and UGC level to provide an improved service delivery to students. *Section 6* of this report proposes five main issues to be discussed and progressed at this third² workshop on May 16 - 19 next. These arise from the recommendations in *Section 5*, and from the discussions held at the two preceding workshops.

2.8 The report is written with two audiences in mind:

- o participants from the UGC and the Universities attending the *Third Workshop / Retreat*, for whom this will form a background and discussion document
- o staff at COL and other agencies in a position to provide some support for development of the External Degree programmes.

Those in the first of these two groups will already be very familiar with most of the information and issues presented here, and are fully aware of the need for reforms in the External Degree system in Sri Lankan universities. Hopefully, however, the re-framing and bringing together of these issues from an outsider's perspective may help in the necessary process of reflection on a way forward.

² Two earlier workshops on external degrees had already been conducted by the UGC, the first in August 2001, the second in February 2002 (see 3.2 and 3.3 below)

3. CONDUCT OF THE STUDY

3.1 This visit was originally planned for mid-August 2001, but, for reasons beyond our control, was postponed for six months. However, in preparation for the visit, a request for various forms of documentation, and a list of preliminary discussion points (see *Appendix 1*), was sent by COL to the UGC in advance. This material formed the basis of a request made by the UGC to the relevant universities for information about their external degree programmes.

3.2 Following this, and in preparation for the postponed consultancy visit, a *First Workshop on External Degree Programmes in the Universities in Sri Lanka*, chaired by Professor KD Arulpragasam (Chairman of the UGC Standing Committee on Distance Education and External Degrees) was held at the UGC on August 1st, 2001. At this workshop, the Directors / Co-ordinators of the External Degree Programmes at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka, and the Universities of Jaffna, Kelaniya, Peradineya, Ruhuna, and Sri Jayewardenepura, presented information about their programmes; representatives from the Open University of Sri Lanka were invited as observers. Although it did not prove possible at the time of this workshop to gather all the relevant information (eg. data on completion rates, QA procedures, student demographics, and income generated), the information provided, summarised by Professor Arulpragasam, formed an extremely valuable input to this report.

3.3 A *Second Workshop on External Degree Programmes* was held at the start of the second week of my visit, on February 25th, involving, in addition to the participants at the first workshop, the Director of the external *Bachelor of Information Technology* programme (ICT, University of Colombo). Useful updating and complementary information on several of the external degree programmes was presented at this meeting, notably more details of completion rates, and of income generated. And progress was clearly made in the identification of key policy, financial, and implementation issues to do with the eventual reform of external degree programmes; the valuable discussions held during the day have formed a major input to this report. The Programme and the list of invited participants at this Workshop can be found in *Appendix 3*.

3.4 Before and after the *Second Workshop*, I was able to hold discussions with key individuals involved in implementing the existing External Degree Programmes, and to make some very useful and informative visits to relevant institutions. The full programme of meetings and visits is given in *Appendix 2*.

3.5 During the final and third week, I presented a draft of this report to Professor Mendis and Professor Arulpragasam, at the UGC; in particular, we discussed the conclusions and suggestions made (see *Section 5*), and the main issues to be addressed at the *Third Workshop* in May (see *Section 6*). My final drafting of these two sections takes into account the comments made at this meeting, the views expressed at subsequent discussions and meetings, and my reflections after my return to the UK.

3.6 I cannot pretend to have used any sort of structured methodology in conducting this task: my approach has been more akin to that of investigative journalism than to a scientifically designed field study. As is so often the case, several of the items in the interview checklist which I had prepared in advance proved to be irrelevant or inappropriate; and as new information was unearthed, and new avenues opened up during discussions and meetings, I often deviated from my pre-prepared line of enquiry. I have tried to listen to as many points of view as possible during such a short period, to consult and analyse as many documentary sources as I could obtain (see *Appendix 6*), and to visit as many institutions as feasible within the time constraints.

3.7 Now and again, I was able, serendipitously, to speak (sometimes with the help of interpreters) to some students and graduates of external degree programmes; I would like to have been able to meet more students for structured focus group discussions, but the practical obstacles (of arranging such meetings formally, and of overcoming the language barrier) made it difficult.

3.8 Any errors, biases, or misinterpretations in this report are, of course, my responsibility.

4. THE EXTERNAL DEGREE SITUATION

4.1 Background

4.1.1 State-provided education has been free from primary to tertiary levels for many decades in Sri Lanka, resulting in a net enrolment of almost 100% of the age group in compulsory primary education, and around 70% in secondary education; adult literacy rates stand at around 92%, far higher than in many other South Asian countries. However, at the tertiary level, the picture is not so healthy, with a low participation rate, (set by the Government in the light of budgetary and resource constraints) of around 2% of the relevant age cohort, compared to a mean of 8% for all Asian countries taken together.

Table 1 below gives an approximate summary of recent data, and clearly demonstrates the 'pyramid of opportunity' in access to education from primary through to tertiary levels. Of the 73,347 candidates who sat the A-Level (A/L) examinations for the academic year 1999/2000, only 12,500 - 17% of those qualified for entry - were admitted to full-time higher education.

Nos entering primary school	350,000	100%
Nos sitting A/L examinations	150,000	43%
Nos qualified for University admission	73,350	21%
Nos admitted to full-time University study	12,500	3.6%

Table 1: Summary data for the academic year 1999 / 2000³

4.1.2 It has been said that education is the favourite pastime of Sri Lankans, and there is clearly much truth in this statement - for example, a significant proportion of advertising in the press is for educational offerings, ranging from private tuition for A/L exams, to fairly aggressive marketing of certificates, degrees and post-graduate courses from institutions within and outside the country. As implied by the figures in Table 1 above, education, certainly at secondary and tertiary level, has become an extremely competitive matter, with thousands of school-leavers each year trying to jump the hurdle of A/L exams. This situation has spawned a widespread growth of 'tutories' (or 'crammers') offering private tuition and exam preparation to secondary school pupils; these 'tutories' may be located in custom-built premises, in Buddhist temple precincts (Pirivenas), or in individual tutors' homes. Something like 95% of A/L schoolchildren attend private classes for up to four hours every afternoon, after an already demanding six hours in the free State schools. Many State-employed teachers

³ Source: from a presentation by the Chairman, UGC

supplement their salaries by working in these 'tutories' after hours. As we shall see later, this tradition (of use of private tutorial institutions) is one which underpins many of the External Degree Programmes.

4.1.3 Given the competitive nature of the educational system, and the traditional role it has played in the past in selecting people for employment in the public sector, it is no surprise that teaching at secondary level is very qualification-oriented. A common complaint made by academics at the Universities is that many students have not developed reading skills - in the sense of reading around their subject and developing skills of reflection, analysis, application, and problem-solving; this is hardly surprising if the emphasis at A/L has often been on rote-learning, note-taking, and rehearsal of answers to previous years' examination questions, and if school library facilities are limited. Another frequently voiced issue concerns poor standards of comprehension and expression in English amongst school-leavers and university students, which is a major drawback for study of many disciplines - especially those related to employment needs (Science, Technology, Management, Commerce, Computing, Information Technology...). Steps are now being taken by the Government to encourage the use of the English medium for teaching Science subjects, and, eventually, other areas as well.⁴

No of Universities (including the Open University)	13
No of University Institutes	12
No of Faculties	61
No of Departments	370
No of academic staff	3,268
No of full-time under-graduate students	41,000
No of post-graduate students (f/t + p/t)	6,400
No of students enrolled at the Open University	17,000
Approximate nos. of students registered for External Degrees	166,000

Table 2: Selected University Statistics, 1999⁵

4.1.4 The University system is in many respects well-resourced, with a high mean ratio of academics to full-time undergraduates (1:12.5 - see *Table 2*), a good pool of post-graduates, many highly qualified staff, and centres of excellence in academic research. However, there is concern both about the undergraduate curriculum and teaching methods, and the not infrequent disruptions to the academic calendar caused by staff and student strikes and agitation. In 1997 a Presidential Task Force was established to make recommendations on University reforms (expansion, curriculum

⁴ Dr KD Arulpragasam, *The value of learning Science*, Daily News, Feb 27th, 2002

⁵ Sri Lanka Universities Year Book, 1999/2000

reform, quality assurance, administration, career guidance, staff development, finance...). The recommendations in these areas are now being implemented by the Universities, and most institutions have set up Career Guidance Units and Staff Development Units, and have initiated some curriculum reforms (introduction of unit/modular systems, continuous assessment, demand-oriented programmes, and more emphasis on English as a medium of instruction).

4.1.5 Hopefully, these ongoing reforms will help to reduce the mismatch between many University qualifications and the unfilled needs and demands of the private sector employment market. It is estimated that there are currently around 70,000 unemployed / under-employed graduates in the country, especially amongst those with Arts degrees (there are even several *Associations* of unemployed graduates). I was told that a survey conducted in April 1997 of the 1988/89 batch of Arts graduates at the University of Kelaniya found that 69% of them were unemployed one year after obtaining their degree. Many school-leavers opt for Arts degrees (which include Social Sciences) because they are perceived as 'easier', and require a lower mean A/L mark for entry. Eleven universities offer *BA* degrees, accounting traditionally for around one-third of all enrolments (eg, in 1996/97, 12,209 students enrolled for Arts, equal to 33% of the total internal undergraduate enrolment that year).

4.2 The Students

4.2.1 What happens to the large numbers of students qualified to enter University each year but whose A/L marks are not high enough to gain a place on a full-time degree programme? As Table 3 shows, over and above the 17.5% who gain a full-

<i>Full-time on-campus University degree</i>	17.5%
Public advanced technical education	1.5%
Private post-secondary institutes	9.0 %
Other post-secondary study	7.0%
Employment (sub-standard)	28.0%
Unemployed	30.0%
Study abroad	2.0 %
Non-labour force (eg housewives)	5.0 %

Table 3 'Destinations' of students sitting A/L Exams⁶

⁶ Source : UGC

time University place, only around 20% of those reaching the University entrance standard in the A/L exams go on to some form of full-time post-secondary education. About 58% fall into the 'substandard employment' and unemployed categories, and it is from this population (of around 35,000 of those who sat A/L in the 1999/2000 academic year) that the External Degree Programmes, and, in some measure, the Open University, draw their clientele.

4.2.2 Six Universities (see *Appendix 4*) and one Institute (see *Appendix 5*) offer External Degree Programmes. Strictly speaking, however, no 'programmes' as such (in the sense of *teaching programmes*) are offered by the Universities. It is significant that the Units responsible for external students are called External *Examination* Units or Departments, and that their traditional mission⁷ - which still to a very large extent informs current practice - is to register students for exams, and disseminate the results. Large numbers of students are thus registered for external degree examinations through these Units. Because of differences in the ways in which registration information is recorded by different institutions, it is not possible to gain an accurate total figure of the numbers of 'live' students involved. However, the total number of registered students ('dormant' and 'live' together) is of the order of 166,000. Of these, around 26,000 enrolled in 2001.

4.2.3 Much useful information is collected on registration application forms (age, gender, citizenship, civil status, race, religion, employment, address, previous qualifications, preferred language...). However, because these records are generally paper-based (although in some institutions the information is being transferred to computerised data-bases⁸), and because staff resources are limited, it is not possible to easily gain a clear overall picture of the demographics and characteristics of the external student population. Basically, without a lot of very time-consuming and tedious analysis, it is not possible to answer the question *who enrolls for external degrees?* A significant proportion of new registrations are undoubtedly recent school-leavers with A Levels, but because drop-out data is not collected in a readily analysable form, and many students seem to survive only a year or two in the system, it is very difficult to obtain a 'snapshot' of the characteristics of the overall population in any given year. Casual observation of classes attended by external students

⁷ A University Ordinance of 1961 empowered the (then) University of Ceylon to "...conduct external examinations for enabling those who are not students of the University to obtain degrees, diplomas and other academic distinctions of the University...". From well before this time, University College was preparing students for the external degrees of the University of London. In 1972, the University of Ceylon Act No.1 established a single University in place of the (by then) four existing ones, and all external examination arrangements from 1972-78 were centralised under the aegis of the External Services Agency (ESA). Although the ESA did make arrangements for some support to external students (radio broadcasts, seminars, limited library facilities...) it remained essentially a unit for registering students for external examinations. The ESA was absorbed into the Open University of Sri Lanka after 1978, and responsibility for external degrees was then once again devolved to the individual Universities - hence the current situation with six universities running External Examinations units.

⁸ Student records for the *BIT* Programme are entirely computerised, but this is an exception to the rule

suggests that the age range is from 20 years up to 50 years, with the majority in their early twenties. However, the profile of the student populations probably varies from one University to another. For example, I was told that external students on the *BA Programme* at Peradeniya are mainly in the employed 30-40 year age group, with only 10% in the 20-30 year range; most of them are married, around 65% are women, and around 40% are teachers⁹.

4.3 Preferred Degrees

4.3.1 The great majority of external students are following *BA degrees*:

- o at the University of Peradeniya, 8,500 students were registered for the *First Exam in Arts* in 2001, and 3264 for the *Final Exam* (in 2000); in total, there are apparently 60,000 students registered on the *BA degrees* at this University
- o in 2001, 12,312 students in total were registered on *BA (Gen)* degrees at the Universities of Sri Jayawardenapura (5,500), Kelaniya (1,942), Jaffna (1,128), and Ruhuna (3,742).

4.3.2 The next most popular degree is the *Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT)* offered by the Institute of Computer Technology at the University of Colombo; this programme enrolled 4,560 students when it started in 2001 (of which 2,647 are still 'live'), and a further 3,924 have been enrolled at the start of this year. The *BIT* programme stands apart from the other external degree programmes, for a variety of reasons; in many respects - as discussed in the relevant sections below - it can be considered as a model of good practice (see *Appendix 5*).

4.3.3 The third most popular degree is the *B.Sc. in Business Administration* offered by the University of Sri Jayawardena, with 2,500 students enrolled countrywide in 2001.

4.3.4 Next come the cluster of *BScMan*, *BCom*, *BMan*, and *BCom&Man* degrees, with a total of 1349 students enrolled in 2001:

- o Kelaniya: the *BBM (Gen)* (137), and *BCom (Sp)* (348)
- o Sri Jayawardenepura : *BScMan* (250), and *BCom (Gen)* (260)
- o Eastern University: *BCom&Man* (195)
- o Jaffna : *BCom* (159)

4.3.5 Very few external students are registered for Science degrees:

- o Kelaniya: *BSc (Gen)*, with 60 students
- o Eastern: *BSc*, *BSc (Agric)*, with 19 students

Peradeniya did register students for a *BSc* in the past, but stopped in 1999: access to laboratories for practical work was a major obstacle, and it was felt that the OUSL Science courses offered a better option to students¹⁰.

⁹ It may be pertinent to ask whether enrolment on an unsupported External Degree is the best way of improving the knowledge and skills of serving school-teachers; although, of course, attainment of the Degree leads to a salary increase...

¹⁰ From a conversation with the Dean of the Science Faculty at the University of Peradeniya.

4.4 Course Materials

4.4.1 With the exception of the *BIT* Programme (see 4.4.2 below), very little is provided to external students in the way of resource materials for their studies. Each university provides comprehensive information on registration requirements, fees, subject combinations, exam procedures, and so on (eg the 35 page *Student Handbook* for External Degree Courses published by the University of Kelaniya, available for Rs 20). And, for most degrees, some form of syllabus is provided to students - either a short outline one, or something more detailed (eg the 32 page *Detailed Syllabus for Each Subject* produced for the *BSc Business Admin* degree at Sri Jayewardenapura). But even a detailed syllabus is generally nothing more than a list of topic headings, with no indication of their relative importance, or of recommended study times for each topic. To obtain clues on what are considered the key topics, students have to rely on consultation of past years' exam papers: some universities have sets of papers available for purchase, (eg the *Past Papers in English 1995-2000* for the First Examination in Arts, University of Sri Jayawardenepura, at 200 Rs, but without model answers).

4.4.2 The resources provided to students on ICT's *Bachelor in Information Technology (BIT)* Programme are more substantial:

- o the 55 A4 page *Detailed Syllabus for Year 1*, for example, contains not only topic headings, but also guide times for tuition for each topic, module objectives and more detailed topic objectives, practical work tasks, and guidance on texts for reading and reference (for main and supplementary reading); at 100 Rs, this is very good value, and is an essential resource for tutors as well as students.
- o the *Model Question Papers* that are available include model answers
- o the *BIT Website* (<http://www.bit.lk/>) has five main strands (*Information, Examinations, Announcements, What's New?*, and *Contact Us*); this is a veritable treasure house of learning resources, with case-studies, teaching material (PowerPoint slides, Word documents...), FAQ's, past Exam papers with model answers, recommended reading, and links to carefully selected external URL's with relevant resource material ...)
- o a half-hour *TV programme*, recorded live to video, is broadcast every Thursday evening at 22.00 hrs, providing guidance, for example, on model examination questions with discussion of the answers
- o a few copies of core reading texts have been donated to public libraries for consultation by BIT students.

More details of the *Bachelor of Information Technology* Programme can be found in *Appendix 5*.

4.5 Student Support

4.5.1 Tutorial and lecturing support for external degree students is generally not provided by any of the universities (other than occasional seminars¹¹ for orientation and exam preparation). Apart from budgetary constraints (and the problems involved in ear-marking registration and exam fee income to support external students), I have been told that two factors underpin this situation:

- o it is national policy that state-provided education should be free, hence the universities cannot charge tuition fees for students registered on external degree programmes (although they can charge fees for teaching Diplomas and Taught MA's, as is the case at the University of Kelaniya, for example)
- o there has been strong opposition from full-time students in some universities to the use of campus facilities and resources (libraries, laboratories, lecture rooms, equipment, and faculty staff time...) by external students; this has been one factor, for example, in the closing down of external degree opportunities in Science-based subjects. Internal students feel they have 'won out' in the gruelling competition for a full-time place, and many of the more vocal ones do not see why they should have to share their 'prize' with those who (although qualified) failed to get in; given the threats of disruptions and agitation, these students have to be listened to, regardless of the validity of their views.

4.5.2 Despite what has been said above, one University (Eastern), does provide tuition (and lab work facilities for Science students during weekends and vacations) to external degree students. Tuition fees of Rs 30,000 are charged for the *B.Sc.*, and of Rs 6000 per year for the *B.Com&Business Administration* courses; lecturers are paid Rs 300 per lecture hour for their contributions. And, in fact, the relevant section¹² of the *University Statutes, By-laws, and Regulations*, does seem to permit the charging of fees. Eastern University has relatively small numbers of external students, and there have been no complaints from internal students about the use of university facilities and staff time by external students.

4.5.3 However, for the reasons cited in 4.5.1, External Degree students at most universities (other than Eastern) follow the time-honoured practice, from their A/L days, of enrolling for teaching support in a plethora of privately run 'tutories' and institutions. For the majority of external degrees, there seems to be no comprehensive information available on which students use which of these many different organisations, nor who teaches in them, nor what is the quality of the support provided. In some cases, teaching support is provided, amongst others, by faculty members from the appropriate departments of the Universities offering the external

¹¹ These 'seminars' generally take the form of three-hour sessions with several hundred students attending talks by faculty staff covering key points and known areas of difficulty, for the examinations; they also perform an important function in giving students a sense of 'belonging' to the University, to see the Vice-Chancellors and Deans, and, of course, to meet other students (social function).

¹² Section 135 (e) states that "...*Bye-laws may be made by the governing authority of a Higher Educational institution in respect of... the fees to be charged for courses of study and examinations prescribed for degrees...*"

degrees, who give classes at weekends and evenings, for which they are paid fees (presumably, in relation to the numbers of students enrolled in the particular class). In other cases, the teachers involved may have no link at all to the providing University, and may not be very familiar with the syllabus. I was able to find out a little about some of these teaching support arrangements, summarised below; however, I have no idea of how typical or representative these cases might be.

4.5.3 Some of the students enrolled on the *BA* programme at the University of Kelaniya attend classes at the *Vidyalankara Pirivena* close to the university. This Pirivena has close traditional links with the University, and its Director and Principal (the Venerable Dr W Kusaladhamma) is Chancellor of the University. Weekend lectures with attendances of up to 300-400 students are given there by Faculty members, as are small group revision classes; examinations for the degree are held on the premises as well. Teaching methods are essentially 'chalk and talk'. The well-stocked and spacious library can be used by external degree students; the premises and facilities are mainly used, however, for the Pirivena's own school classes (a Montessori infants' school, classes for the young monks in residence, and various post-secondary courses¹³ ...).

4.5.4 The University of Sri Jayewardenepura has a formal arrangement with the *National Youth Council (NYC)* for provision of teaching support for external students in rural areas enrolled on its *BA(Gen)* and *BSc Business Administration* programmes. This *Tharuna Seva Sarasaviya* (Youth Services University) scheme started in 1997 in the Polonnaruwa district, and now extends to 14 districts; it provided support to 3,074 external students in 2000 (around 7.5% of the total external students enrolled at the University). Tuition fees are Rs 250 - 300 per month (compared to private 'tutories' charging up to Rs 2000 /month for tuition for the *BSc in Business Admin*). The main focus is on providing affordable support to disadvantaged rural youth, and the scheme seeks to reverse the traditionally low pass rates for external degrees. Given the difficulties in finding qualified and competent tutors in rural areas, especially for *Business Studies*, orientation and training sessions are organised for them, with inputs from central Faculty staff. Class sizes may be around 12-15, with classes held at weekends. The tutors are often recent graduates or part-time schoolteachers. The NYC has 13 Regional Centres outside Colombo, where the classes are held, some of which have (minimal) library facilities for use by external students. The scheme can also provide career guidance to external students. Discussions are currently underway between the NYC and the Eastern University for providing similar support services to its external students.

4.5.5 Students following ICT's *Bachelor in Information Technology (BIT)* programme have a wide range of private IT teaching Institutes to choose from (63 last year, and up to 100 this year). I was able to visit two of these in Colombo offering face-to-face tuition (*IDM Computer Studies (Pvt) Ltd*, with 280 BIT students enrolled, and the

¹³ The *Vidyalankara Pirivena* started its own 'Pandit' degree courses in 1892, with Sinhala, Pali, and Sanskrit as the main subjects

*Royal Institute International School of Higher Education*¹⁴), with 116 BIT students. Both of these were very well equipped with computer labs and library facilities, and can afford to attract highly qualified tutors. BIT students pay relatively high fees (Rs 16,000 /semester), reflecting the strong market demand and competition for well qualified IT graduates. Class sizes for BIT students vary from 30 - 80 students / tutor. The *Royal Institute* also provides remedial classes in English for IT for those students who need them.

4.5.6 Some *BIT* students, especially those living outside the main urban areas, and working full-time, experience difficulties in attending face-to-face classes. I had the opportunity to visit a small organisation, *Skills Lanka Ltd*, which has taken the welcome initiative to develop its own distance education support programme for such students. Self-study lesson materials, with self-assessment and discussion questions at the end of each lesson, have been written to support the BIT syllabus, and are made available in print and on a CD-ROM; students can have phone contact with their tutors, and submit homework assignments for marking and feedback. Practical sessions in regional computer labs are held on Poya days. Half-way through each semester, students are sent mock exam papers (MCQ's, as in the actual first year exam), on which tutors provide feedback. *Skills Lanka Ltd* employs one full-time and 5 part-time tutors for the *BIT* programme; the latter are people working in the IT industry, with the appropriate academic qualifications. At the moment, only 25 students are enrolled on this distance programme (another 25 follow face-to-face *BIT* classes on the premises in Colombo), but, given the apparent high quality of the lesson materials and level of tutorial support provided, the system has great potential for expansion.

4.5.7 For whatever reasons, some of the Universities running External Degrees seem wary about providing students with information which will help them identify suitable support and teaching organisations for their studies, possibly because it is not considered appropriate to seem to be officially endorsing such outside bodies. ICT is an exception to this generalisation, as it publishes on its Web site details of all the institutes which provide *BIT* tuition, with their *pass rates* for each subject. It is then up to the students to decide where to go for support. Another exception would be the formal link between the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and the National Youth Council (see 4.5.4). One excellent initiative in providing advice to students is the founding of an alumni association (*BAESA: Business Administration External Students' Association*) by graduates of the *BSc in Business Admin.* at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura; *BAESA* currently has a membership of 62 graduates from the programme, and an Executive Committee. It has graded teaching institutes (as A, B, or C) and also provides counselling services and career help to students. *BAESA* also organises exam preparation seminars (for a fee of Rs 1,000 - 1500), and graduation ceremonies (Rs 2,500 /student).

¹⁴ The *Royal Institute* is also accredited by the University of London to provide tuition for its external degrees (eg *BSc in Computing and IT*).

4.5.8 Although the *BIT* Programme, and the *BAESA* initiative, are exceptional signs of welcome change, the following statement¹⁵ by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kelaniya sums up the general situation succinctly: " *The external examination divisions in the traditional Universities conduct examinations for those students who are registered with them, but in most instances do not provide any assistance by way of instruction, tutoring, or counselling and these latter educational functions have fallen into the lap of unregulated private institutions and individuals responding to a market opportunity. In addition to these drawbacks, inordinate delays in the release of examination results occur frequently. On the whole the external examination system in Sri Lankan Universities is not in a satisfactory state and has become the subject of a great deal of public criticism.*"

4.6 Student Progress and Examinations

4.6.1 It is difficult to obtain accurate figures on drop-out, retention, and completion rates per entry cohort for external students, because of differences in the ways information is collected and recorded between institutions, because the periods of validity for initial registrations vary (from one to five years), because students can choose to apply for exams when it suits them (eg can apply for the First Year exam one or several years after initial registration...), and because requirements for re-registration have only been introduced recently (and partially). Basically, the institutions only know if a student is still 'live' when he or she applies to register for an exam - and the accurate statistics that are available are, of course, for numbers who applied for, sat, passed, and failed each exam. To further complicate matters, some institutions are suffering a serious backlog, not just in releasing exam results, but in holding the exams (the University of Kelaniya, for example, still - in March 2002 - has not been able to hold the external exams for the academic year 2000). Once again, an exception to this general situation should be made for ICT's *Bachelor in Information Technology* programme, which has set up a fairly sophisticated computerised student record system from the start, and which uses machine-marked MCQ's for its first year exams, enabling results to be processed and disseminated within days.

4.6.2 Looking at examination figures, and taking the *BA* Programmes as examples, one can draw several general broad conclusions, even though the information has been presented in different formats by different institutions, and seems to contain some anomalies:

- 1) In a given year, there are far more students sitting first year exams than second year exams, than third (and, in some cases fourth) year exams; looking at *BA* Exams, for example:
 - Jaffna, 2001 (yr1> yr2> yr3> yr4 exams): 910 > 701 > 343 > 17
 - Sri Jayawardenepura, 1999 (yr1>yr2>yr3 exams): 1866 > 949 > 490
 - Kelaniya, 1997 (nos applying) (Ist> Pt1 > Pt 2) : 2278 > 1873 > 284
 - Peradineya, 1999 (1st > final) : 6827 > 3264

¹⁵ see Tillekeratne K (1999b)

Although the figures refer to different cohorts, and numbers of students registering vary from year to year, one can assume that there is a significant annual wastage, with many students giving up after the first, and even second year, exams.

- 2) Pass rates for individual exams vary, but are always very much lower than for the equivalent internal exams; again, for the BA degrees:
 - Jaffna, 2001 [yr1> yr2> yr3> yr4 exams]: 22%>40%>58%>88%, compared to over 90% for internal candidates
 - Sri Jayawardenepura, 1999 (yr1>yr2>yr3 exams): 43%>38%>38%, compared to over 84% for internal candidates
 - Kelaniya, 1999, 1st year exam only : 52% (no information on internal pass rates given)
 - Peradineya, 1999 (1st > final) : 48%>38% (no information on internal pass rates given)
- 3) Again looking at the BA Degree, only one institution (Kelaniya) has provided information from which it is possible to make a reasoned estimate of the percentage of students registering who obtain a degree at the end: in the years 1993 to 1995, for example, 9321 students in total enrolled on this BA degree, and from 1995 to 1998, 2404 graduated in total. Making an optimistic assumption that most students took three years to complete (ie that students entering in '95 took their final exam in '98, and so on), this gives an overall pass rate of 26%. In total, since 1995, the University of Kelaniya's External Degree Programme has produced 2488 graduates (2404 Arts, 84 Commerce), from a base of 35,726 total student registrations to date.

4.6.3 It is common knowledge that there are often serious delays in arranging external examinations, in getting the scripts marked, in getting the results out to students, and in sending out final degree certificates (with the exception of ICT's *Bachelor of Information Technology* programme). The situation regarding release of external exam results has been qualified as "... very serious ... and chaotic"¹⁶ Reasons given for these delays include:

- o insufficient clerical staff to organise exams and process results at peak periods of the year
- o the reliance on essentially paper-based systems, using massive ledgers for recording results (although computer-based systems are gradually being introduced)
- o problems in identifying and booking suitable venues for holding exams
- o the time taken by Faculty staff to mark examination papers, given their primary responsibilities to full-time internal students

¹⁶ Address by Prof RP Gunawardene, Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education and Information Technology, at the *First Workshop on External Degrees*, UGC, August 1st 2001

o standard payment rates for script-marking and for other tasks¹⁷ which are considered inadequate (although marking fees have recently been increased). The Director of the External Exams Unit at the University of Peradeniya has managed to a large extent to remedy the problem, having recently reduced the delay in getting exam results out from nearly two years to 6 months.

4.7 Fees / Income and Expenditure

4.7.1 A considerable income is generated in fees from the various External Degree Programmes (see *Appendix 4* for examples of fees charged). Not all institutions have provided overall figures of income and expenditure, but illustrative examples of overall figures of income and expenditure include:

- o Ruhuna: total accumulated balance of income over expenditure since start of programme in 1997 : Rs 3,752,141 (as of 2000)
- o Sri Jayawardenepura: total accumulated balance of income over expenditure generated since 1997: Rs. 28,998,934; for 2001: surplus of Rs. 8,768,934 (income of Rs. 14,981,429 less expenditure of Rs. 6,212,495);
- o Jaffna, for 2000: surplus of Rs. 1,269,537 (income of Rs. 2,168,580 less expenditure of Rs. 899,043).

4.7.2 Treasury and University regulations appear to be a barrier to earmarking this income for support and development of the External Degree Programmes¹⁸; income generated has to go into general University funds, and a significant proportion of it is then set against the overall university income by the Treasury. An exception to this generalisation would be the income generated by the ICT *Bachelor of Information Technology* Programme, which is used to finance the Programme - the more independent status of the Institute (compared to the External Examination Units of the other Universities) underlies this difference.

4.7.3 To summarise, in the words of one of the External Examinations Coordinators :
" *..in the present situation, the External Examinations Branch functions only as a moneymaking unit of the University, which does not provide sufficient academic support to students who are eligible for such services. Financial problems interfere when plans are being made to acquire supporting staff*"¹⁹

¹⁷For example, I was told that delays in processing Certificates at one university were due to the fact that the clerk writing the Certificates (by hand) considered the official UGC payment of Rs 6 per certificate inadequate, and was 'going slow' until the fee was doubled.

¹⁸ Although Eastern University uses part of the fee income to pay lecturers who tutor external students

¹⁹ Professor VG Kulasena, in his reports to the 1st and 2nd UGC *Workshops on External Degrees*.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 The conclusions and suggestions made below are informed by the summaries made by Professor Arulpragasam after the *First* and *Second Workshops* on the External Degree Programme. As I was asked to make a 'personal assessment' of the situation, however, they have, of necessity, been influenced by my impressions during my brief stay in Sri Lanka, and by my own views on the proper conduct of distance / external / flexible degree programmes. Any biases, distortions, or omissions in what follows should therefore be laid at my door rather than that of the Chairman of the UGC's *Committee on External Degrees and Distance Education*.

5.1.2 As a preamble, it should be stressed that changes to the overall External Degree system cannot be considered in isolation from the curricular, administrative, assessment, and teaching method reforms being gradually implemented in the traditional, on-campus, setting - in particular, the introduction of a semester-based, modular, credit system, with continuous assessment. Furthermore, any developments should be placed in the context of the moves towards more flexible provision of higher education opportunities that are occurring elsewhere.

5.1.3 I would argue that there is a need to think 'outside the box' in planning for the future: I was struck by how compartmentalised the degree opportunities in Sri Lanka seem to be, with programmes locked into rigid frameworks (one studies *either* as a full-time campus student, *or* as an external degree student, *or* as a distance student at the Open University, *or* in extension and outreach programmes...). However, some signs of flexibility are appearing in the system:

- o a proposal by the Eastern University of Sri Lanka that external students might transfer laterally to internal on-campus study if they passed their first year exams successfully
- o at the University of Kelaniya, I was told that full-time students who had passed the first year exams successfully but who were unable to continue on-campus study (eg for employment reasons) could make a case for transferring to the equivalent External Programme
- o at the University of Moratuwa, a decision was recently taken to award credit towards a degree for students who have passed an appropriate Open University course.

5.1.4 Credit transfer arrangements between institutions and programmes (such as the *Common Credit Currency* proposal under discussion now) deserve serious attention; such a provision could 'loosen up' the overall HE system, provide more flexible opportunities for study, and pave the way for the future use of new communication technologies in education²⁰.

²⁰ See also Section 5.3.5 below

5.2 Student Progress

5.2.1 An essential pre-requisite for the effective design, operation, and improvement of any educational system is access to relevant information about the learners; this includes entry data (age, gender, occupation, location, previous qualifications, motivation for study...) which can be collected at the application stage; student progress data (assessment and exam results, fee payments...); and feedback and evaluation information to help identify problems in the system and improve course delivery and support. This is particularly true, of course, in the case of distance and external programmes, where teaching and support staff do not have regular personal contact with students, and student profiles must be built up from surveys or from application data²¹.

5.2.2 There does not seem to be a clear picture at the moment of the characteristics of most of the students in the External Degree system. Much of the relevant entry data (demographics, previous qualifications, etc) is there, but is not accessible, and has not been analysed. Without such information, appropriately analysed, it is difficult to see how support services (classes and seminars, use of local resource centres: see *Section 5.5*) can be properly orchestrated to bring maximum benefit to students.

5.2.3 Student progress data (other than records of examination results) is patchy, to say the least, so it is not possible to establish, for example, how many of the registered students who have not applied to sit examinations are still in the system. I saw no evidence of any formalised attempts being made to collect feedback from students on how or where they studied, how much time they spent each week on study, what teaching and support services and institutes they use, what course materials they could access, and where, and so on. So it is difficult to establish, for example, what are the factors associated with success or failure in the examinations, and why it is that some external examinations have relatively high pass rates (eg the University of Kelaniya's External *BA* and *BCom* examination pass rates for 1993-99 were, respectively, between 50%-70% and 45%-72%) whilst other, equivalent examinations elsewhere have much lower ones.

5.2.4 There is little evidence (other than anecdotal) of what happens to graduates who have completed an external degree, let alone of what happens to those who fail the exams or drop out altogether. Again, such information, derived from follow-up or tracer studies, could play an important role in helping bring about improvements in the system.

²¹ see Jayatilleke, B.G *et al* (1997), for an example of profiling of Open University students in Sri Lanka

Suggestions: Student Progress _____

- Review and standardise application form and re-registration form information
 - Computerise student records using appropriate data-base systems for extracting and cross referencing information
 - Make sure re-registration occurs *every year* (not just after the 5 year validity period for initial registration)
 - Encourage formation of student and alumni associations
 - Conduct surveys of a sample of graduates drawn from the main external programmes, and of a sample of drop-outs and failures, to attempt to establish common success and failure factors
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5.3 Programmes and Curricula

5.3.1 There is general agreement that the External Degree Programme needs to be broadened with more employment-related offerings, and with shorter Certificate and Diploma courses. Specific suggestions made at the first two *Workshops* include:

- o a Diploma in *English* (Peradeniya)
- o courses in *Management, IT, Finance, and Banking* (Ruhuna)
- o courses in *Science, Maths, Statistics, and Bankers Exams* (Jaffna)

So the will is clearly there to move into new areas: and maybe if more such courses were introduced and promoted as employment-linked, a significant proportion of students would opt for them in preference to the BA degrees currently on offer.

5.3.2 I have been told that the programmes for the existing External Degrees often no longer correspond to the supposedly equivalent ones followed by internal students, because of the curricular reforms gradually being introduced for campus-based programmes (modularisation, credit systems, continuous assessment etc)²². Some sort of harmonisation is surely needed here, especially on continuous assessment. Apart from the issue of equivalence, it is particularly important, I feel, to introduce some form of periodic assessment for external students (based on submission and marking of, for example, monthly homework assignments), to give them some feedback on progress, and to help them to pace their studies: students at the Open University certainly appreciate this. The modular structure of the external *Bachelor of Information Technology* programme, with module-linked assessments, is a model worth examining in this context, for its applicability to other programmes.

²² The very popular *BA* programme at Peradeniya is a case in point, with the implementation of curricular reforms in the internal programme already completed for the first two years of study, and due to cover the entire programme by the end of 2003; whilst the 'corresponding' external degree programme has remained 'basically unchanged, with just two examinations (first year, and final) instead of the much more intensive, module-based, assessment procedures used for internal students.

5.3.3 The question of curricular equivalence to internal degrees apart, several people have mentioned to me their concerns over the academic standards of external degrees as compared to internal degrees. I was not able to ascertain the nature of the procedures and quality assurance checks which are in place to monitor the setting and marking of external examination papers, but it is clearly a matter of concern, both amongst academics involved and - so I was told - amongst the general public.

5.3.4 Before launching into development of new courses *ab initio*, it would be sensible to survey existing courses and course resources available in the country, to see to what extent they can be adopted or modified at minimal cost and thus made available to external students. Examples that come to mind are the *IT Awareness* courses, and the set of courses in *English* (for special purposes), developed by the Open University. There are bound to be many others - it is a matter of establishing what already exists and making the information available.

5.3.5 An essential pre-requisite to increasing the range of higher education opportunities available, the flexibility of study opportunities, and a better match to developing employment needs, is some form of credit transfer system. The proposals currently being discussed by the CVCD will²³, presumably, include the needs of external students in this respect, and generally increase the potential for student mobility between courses, programmes, and institutions. They should also increase the opportunities for students in full-time internal courses to switch to external ones, and to Open University courses, if necessary²⁴. It is now beginning to be recognised that programmes of study need to be made more flexible not only in terms of course content, time schedules, delivery modes, and assessment techniques, but also in terms of encouraging student mobility between programmes. This recognition has far-reaching implications for the reform of External Degrees, and makes it increasingly problematic to continue with a system which is essentially designed only around end-of-year examinations.

Suggestions: Programmes and Curricula _____

- Establish priorities for new programmes and Certificate and Diploma courses related to employment needs
- Identify existing courses and modules which could be incorporated into external degree programmes

²³ See, for example:

- Tillekeratne, K (2001) *Proposed Credit Transfer Scheme for Ensuring Student Mobility*, prepared for the CVCD, Sept 11, 2001

- Tillekeratne, K (2001) *Priorities for Reforming University Education*, prepared for the Education and Research Study Group, University of Kelaniya

²⁴ Including transfer not only from degree courses, but also from technical and vocational courses: for example, students in SLIATE (Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technical Education), NAITA (the National Apprenticeship and Industrial Training Authority) and Technical Colleges should, after two years of study, be considered as eligible for external degrees.

- Carry out an independent review of the content and standards of selected External Examinations, to establish the extent to which they are equivalent to those of corresponding internal degrees
 - Review possibilities for, and implications of, introducing curricular reforms (units, credits, continuous assessment) for External Degrees
 - Consider implications and potential benefits of proposed Common Credit Currency (CCC) plans in opening up more flexible provision for external students
 - Examine the pros and cons of alternative options to an External BA Degree (eg an Open University degree) for the large population of serving school-teachers currently enrolled for external examinations
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5.4 Learning Materials

5.4.1 The coordinators of the external degree programmes are fully aware of the need for the provision of suitable resource and learning materials for external students. At the two *Workshops on External Degrees* held at the UGC, suggestions were made that modules, study guides, units, course introductions, support materials, and so on should be produced. One external degree handbook, under 'Methods of teaching' claims that "...*lesson material and a set of tutorial assignments ... will be made available*". The question is: *when?* And *how?*

5.4.2 Preparation of good quality lesson materials for independent study is a skilled and time-consuming task, requiring a different focus and approach than the more traditional ones associated with writing academic papers or textbooks. However, because the Open University relies on many academics from other universities as consultants and lesson writers/ editors (especially in scientific and technical disciplines) the picture is not too bleak - many university staff have already acquired the necessary experience. And the expertise is not just in the universities, as the example cited in *Section 4.5.6* above, of self-study lesson material prepared for the *BIT* by *Skills Lanka Ltd*, demonstrates. For those who need the training, OUSL is planning to run workshops on design and preparation of independent study materials for academics from the other universities wishing to develop their skills in this area.

5.4.3 In given subject areas, there may already be suitable resource and learning material available in the country that can be bought in and integrated into external degree programmes. There is no point in re-inventing the wheel in such cases, and there is much to be said for trying to overcome the traditional academic's resistance to using material prepared by others (the 'not invented here' syndrome)

5.4.4 Students who have experienced no other method of learning than taking notes from a class teacher or lecturer (the 'spoonfeeding' that I have often been told is so prevalent in the school and university system) will find it hard to adjust to a more independent, self-directed approach to learning. Some form of orientation to study as an external student would surely be desirable, with guidance on planning one's study time, note-taking from books and from lectures, critical reading, organising one's

ideas, mind-mapping, essay writing etc. At the moment, the only advice that is given concerns regulations, and administrative matters: I have not come across any documents with guidance on study skills for external students. It is interesting to note in this context that OUSL students, at the start of their studies, often ask for more lectures and classes, but, once they have realised they can study just as effectively - if not more effectively - from their course units and printed lessons, they prefer the distance mode for their core work, using the face-to-face sessions for discussion and clarification.

5.4.5 Just as students need help in developing appropriate study skills, an equivalent case can be made for providing support and guidance to tutors on the most effective ways of supporting external students. At the very least, tutors should be given some indication of the key learning objectives for each section of a course or module, and guidance on the amount of time to spend on each topic (the detailed syllabus prepared for each module of the *Bachelor of Information Technology* programme is a good exemplar of this). However, to be able to do this, the Universities involved will need to know which institutes are providing tutorial support to their programmes (as ICT does for the institutes attended by *BIT* students).

5.4.6 It has been suggested to me by several people that 'new technologies' (CD-ROM's, the Web...) could be used as a delivery method for getting course and resource materials to students. One has to ask what proportion of students have ready access to PC's (stand-alone and networked) before even thinking about this. The students on the *BIT* programme clearly do have such access, as it is a course about information technology (but even for these students, I suspect that the support which they - and their tutors - find most useful is the set of printed detailed syllabuses, with objectives, self-test questions and exercises, and guide study times). For most of the other programmes, the main priority would be to get some minimal support material prepared as a matter of urgency, and to make it available to students in a readily accessible form. In the first instance, this means print, backed up, where appropriate, by audio-cassettes (which can be recorded and duplicated easily). The Open University can provide advice in the design of print and audio materials for independent study for those academics who need it²⁵, and would also be prepared to place its extensive professional media production facilities at the disposal of academics involved in the external degree programmes.

Suggestions: Learning Materials _____

- For each continuing External Degree programme, a review should be instigated to establish sources of existing learning materials from elsewhere (eg from OUSL) which could be integrated into the programme

²⁵ Many academics outside the OUSL have already acquired this expertise as a result of their existing involvement as subject-matter consultants and writers and editors for OUSL (around 80% of the writers and editors of OUSL course materials are drawn from Faculties of the other universities)

- Where no suitable materials exist already for a given programme, the necessary resources (finance, staff time) should be made available to develop a minimal set of learning materials (*BIT* print materials, and relevant OUSL materials, could be used as models)
 - The UGC should negotiate a framework agreement with OUSL for provision of advice and training in development of learning materials to academics involved in External Degree programmes, and for use of its media production facilities.
 - A 'good study guide'²⁶ tailor-made for external students (with advice on time management, study methods, note-taking, essay writing, exam revision etc) should be developed, made available in the three languages, and distributed to all external students.
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5.5 Support Services

5.5.1 There is a recognition amongst all the external degree coordinators of the need to provide better support services to students, but these are generally interpreted as being the provision of more seminars (generally centrally, sometimes in regional centres as well) to help prepare students for their exams; they are generally given a few weeks before the exam. At these seminars, lecturers from the relevant faculties give talks to sometimes hundreds of students at a time, reviewing points of difficulty in the curriculum, and providing tips on exam techniques. I was not able to ascertain what proportion of students attend these events, but I was assured they were perceived as extremely valuable, for both academic and motivational reasons. Useful as they are, these seminars cannot provide a complete answer to student support needs; one might even say that, at the moment, they represent 'too little, too late'.

5.5.2 The main burden of teaching support has (of necessity in the present scheme of things) to be carried by external bodies offering private tuition. I was surprised to discover the 'hands off' approach of most of the External Exams Units towards these institutes and 'tutories'. I was told that students "*.. just know where to go for support, on the basis of their experience of private tuition at A/L, or through word of mouth, or through advertisements in the press*". This may in many instances be true, but it hardly seems to be a satisfactory state of affairs. Some level of information and counselling for students on what is available should surely be provided? This does not necessarily imply that the University is *endorsing*²⁷ the institutes involved - but, as the example of the BIT Programme shows, if one provides students with a list of institutes and their pass rates, they will know what decisions to make.

²⁶ See, for example: Northedge, A (1990) *The Good Study Guide*, Milton Keynes, The Open University

²⁷ Although the External Degrees Coordinator at Eastern University has suggested that *accredited* external agencies should be used for tuition and practical classes

5.5.3 There seems to be concern over the competence and quality of some of the people recruited by private institutes to tutor external students. If this is the case, then it behoves the Universities to involve themselves in providing some level of orientation and support for these teachers (for example, on the *BA Programme* at Sri Jayawardenepura, faculty staff help in the orientation and training sessions for tutors employed through the National Youth Service's *Tharuna Seva Sarasaviya* scheme). And, as already mentioned, the detailed syllabus prepared for each module of the *BIT Programme* provides learning objectives and guidance on teaching hours for each topic, which help tutors plan their lessons, and ensures some basic level of standardisation of the teaching given.

5.5.4 Although I was not able to obtain any information on the island-wide distribution of external students on the different programmes (but preferences for exam centres would give some clues), the little support (eg the seminars) offered by the Universities seems generally to be based on or near the main campus. There is clearly a need for support services to be made available closer to students' homes. Several organisations (eg SLOU, NYC...) already have regional educational centres, some of them reasonably well equipped with library and IT facilities; and there is the network of public libraries. It would make sense to establish in what measure these resources could be shared by external degree students.

5.5.5 External students need not only academic support, but also motivational support - something which will give them a feeling of 'belonging', of being part of a shared community of interest. Seminars go some way to providing this, but more could be done. In this respect, I was impressed by what I was told about *BAESA* (the *Business Administration External Students' Association*, set up by graduates of the *BSc in Business Administration* at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura). *BAESA* helps students find suitable teaching institutions, provides a channel of communication and counselling, and also helps to organise degree ceremonies. Maybe this concept of an external students /alumni association deserves to be adopted for other programmes?

Suggestions: Support Services _____

- Provide guidance and information to new students on the choice of external and private teaching institutes
 - Provide course-related orientation sessions and guidance material for teachers planning and running classes
 - Identify organisations with regional educational resource centres, prepare an inventory of their facilities, and investigate the ways and means (including the provision of additional resources) by which they could be shared with external students
 - Encourage existing external degree units to explore the idea of supporting the establishment of student / alumni associations
 - Set up a small expert group to investigate the future potential of new technologies of information and communication (NTIC) for supporting External Degree studies, with a remit to report back in six months.
-

5.6 Financial and Organisational Issues

5.6.1 For most of the external degree programmes, with the exception of the *Bachelor of Information Technology*, a major barrier to improvement and progress is the difficulty experienced in using fee income to support the programmes. Suggestions in this regard made by participants at the *First Workshop*, and subsequently, include:

- o allowing the External Exams branch to use fee income to improve the external programme
- o relaxing strict University rules and regulations which inhibit innovation
- o establishing the External Exams units as cost centres

It seems desirable that the income generated from student fees be used to provide at least a minimal level of academic support services for the students, but it seems to me unlikely that this measure alone will suffice to bring about the improvements needed.

5.6.2 A more fundamental issue is raised simply by considering the implications of the fact that the Units responsible for External Degrees are called External Examination Units or Departments - as one of my interviewees said "... *basically, they are just an extension of the Registry*". As such, it is perhaps understandable that these units experience difficulty in obtaining and maintaining the collaboration of the relevant academic departments in providing even minimal levels of support to their external students. In many instances, as we have seen, they even have problems in ensuring that the examination papers are set and marked; to ask in these circumstances for detailed study guides and other learning materials, as well as tutorial support, to be provided, is clearly unrealistic. One solution that has been proposed²⁸ is that each university should set up a separate Institute (e.g. an Institute of External Degrees - IED), run on a self-financing basis, but established in premises outside the main university campus (to avoid disruption from internal students). Such an Institute would have a Director, advised by a Board of Management, and responsible directly to the Vice-Chancellor. The Institute would draw on the services of relevant committed academic staff, on a contract or temporary consultancy basis, to provide the necessary support to external students. A similar proposal has been made²⁹, for the establishment this time of a Department for Open and Distance Education in each university "...with the necessary academic and technical expertise and multimedia facilities...(which)...may, in time, develop into a full-fledged Faculty". This would be similar in organisational structure to the dual-mode system seen in many Australian universities.

5.6.3 On the other hand, there have also been suggestions that centralisation of some functions currently carried out by the six³⁰ different External Examinations units may be beneficial and cost-effective. A case could certainly be made for a central body (with a similar status to the old External Services Agency) with an overall responsibility for some or all of the following functions:

²⁸ by the Academic Coordinator, External Examinations, University of Kelaniya

²⁹ by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kelaniya : see Tillekeratne, K (2001), p4

³⁰ and possibly more : at least one other University wants to start External Degrees

- o acting as a clearing-house for information on all external, extension, and part-time courses, including Open University courses
- o providing guidance to potential students on choice of courses and programmes, including credit transfer / student mobility information
- o coordinating the use of regional resources (eg SLOU and NYC centres, libraries..) throughout the country to support external students
- o advising external students on recommended / accredited teaching institutes for their chosen programme of study
- o registering students for courses, programmes, and examinations, and collecting the appropriate fees
- o maintaining comprehensive, computerised, student records
- o using the fee income to support the Universities providing the academic programmes, and to help fund new initiatives (eg employment-related Diploma, Certificate, and Degree courses)
- o organising, conducting, and monitoring examinations and appeals (an Examinations Syndicate function)

In a small country like Sri Lanka, with educational resources already stretched to the limit, such a model has its attractions. And it is difficult to see how the first three very important functions above (the clearing-house, advisory, and regional coordination functions) could be carried out other than by a centralised body.

Suggestions: Financial and Organisational Issues_____

- Investigate ways and means, and benefits, of establishing existing External Examinations units as cost centres
 - Conduct feasibility and cost studies of a devolved (Institute / dual mode) model and of a centralised model
-

5.7 The Opportunity for Reform

5.7.1 The need for reform of the External Degree system has been recognised for a long time - in fact, there is a strong *déjà vu* flavour to the current discussions. As long ago as 1978, the then Director of the External Services Agency (ESA) said "*...external candidates who sat the examinations conducted by the previous Universities were not provided with any facilities for the pursuit of their studies. The responsibility of these institutions was confined to registering them, conducting examinations for them, and awarding degrees to those who successfully completed the prescribed examinations. however, with the establishment of the Agency, the need for supporting services came to be increasingly felt and steps were taken to introduce, on its own initiative, such programmes as were possible within the limited financial and other resources*

available to it³¹." The External Services Agency at the time did introduce occasional seminars, a series of radio programmes (broadcast by SLBC on weekday evenings), and a scheme to provide set books to public libraries, to support the BA External Degree; it also considered the use of correspondence tuition, but was unable to proceed with this idea because of lack of resources. The situation now, a quarter of a century later on, is hardly any better; in fact, it could be said to have worsened, both in terms of the scale of the problem (166,000 external students instead of the 9,000 or so in 1978), and in the range of support resources available to many students.

5.7.2 The *Second Workshop on External Degrees* conducted by the UGC during my visit resulted in a set of draft recommendations:

- o each University should decide a prioritised list of subjects on the basis of academic strengths and the demand for them
- o study material should be provided through public libraries
- o external students should be cared for and recognised
- o resource personnel to support external programmes should be drawn from all the universities
- o required legislative amendments should be sent by the Universities to the UGC for consideration
- o the trainers (those in the relevant University departments, and those tutoring external students) should be trained
- o attempts should be made to create an efficient and effective academic support system
- o universities should draw up proposals to establish the External Units as cost centres
- o the possibilities of using radio and TV should be explored
- o data bases of external candidates should be maintained; students should be re-registered annually
- o the examination system should be re-structured so as to evaluate students' work objectively and release the results rapidly.

Desirable as these recommendations are, I wonder whether, without a major re-design of the entire system, they are any more likely to result in substantive and long-term changes as the proposals made by the External Services Agency in the 1970's?

5.7.3 A number of factors, however, taken together, demonstrate how much the environment has changed since the days of the ESA, and suggest that the time is now opportune for the necessary major re-design of the entire system:

- o the curricular reforms being implemented in the Universities make it essential that programme structures and assessment methods for the external programmes be reviewed in their entirety if any form of equivalence is to be maintained
- o the *Bachelor of Information Technology* programme has demonstrated that it is possible to introduce successful innovations in the External Degree system

³¹ Jayawardena, WA (1978) *External Services Agency, University of Sri Lanka : A Review of an Experiment*, p 37

- o fee income from external students is considerable, and, if pooled and used efficiently, could be re-invested in the external programmes to provide support services to students
- o qualified personnel are available both in the universities and outside to develop appropriate learning materials and provide teaching and support services for external students
- o the expertise and competencies exist (at the Open University of Sri Lanka and in the Staff Development units³² elsewhere) to support academic staff in designing and preparing resource materials for external students
- o technical facilities exist at the Open University of Sri Lanka for the development and production of support materials for external students
- o public libraries, and educational resource centres (eg those run by the Open University, and by the National Youth Council), exist in most towns in the country
- o the IT expertise is available for the re-design and implementation of new student record systems and assessment procedures.

Above all, the will exists to bring about the necessary reforms. The question remains: how can this best be harnessed to bring about the necessary radical re-structuring of the External Degree system ?

³² For example, at the Staff Development Centre (SDC) at the University of Colombo.

6. THE THIRD WORKSHOP / RETREAT

6.1 Aim

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'.

6.2 Themes

In my view³³, the following themes should be considered as priorities for discussion and decisions [references in parentheses refer to the related sections of this report]:

(1) Programmes and Curricula [4.3, 5.3]

Identification of priority curricular areas (e.g. employment-related), and programme structures (modularisation of courses, assessment methods, diploma and certificate courses) for external studies provision; ways and means of orienting students towards priority areas and away from programmes which do not lead to or support appropriate employment; consideration of the needs of special categories, such as school teachers.

(2) Quality Assurance [4.6, 5.5]

The identification of systems and procedures for ensuring the academic quality and standards of External Degrees, and, where appropriate, their equivalence to the corresponding Internal programmes, especially in light of the reforms being implemented in the latter.

³³ I was asked to make a personal assessment of the situation, and this has led me to select these five main themes; however, they should be taken as suggestions for consideration rather than as a definitive list.

(3) Student support [4.4, 4.5, 5.4, 5.5]

Identification of what are considered to be the minimum standards of student support acceptable in any External Degree Programme, and the mechanisms and resources needed to enforce these minimum standards. The standards should cover:

- o the course materials and resources supplied to students by the University
- o the teaching support provided by the University
- o the teaching support provided by external agencies and institutes

(4) Inter-institutional collaboration [5.1, 5.4.6, 5.5.4]

The potential for inter-institutional collaboration and the coordinated and shared use of existing facilities in the education system to improve the services and support available to external students; key areas for collaboration are:

- o the development of learning resources for External Degree programmes
- o the introduction of measures (eg credit transfer) to encourage student mobility
- o the shared use of regional educational resource centres

(5) Organisational re-structuring [4.7, 5.2, 5.6]

Identification of the functions which are best centralised, and those which are best devolved, in the reform of the External Degree system; identification of budgetary, policy and legislative measures necessary to remove barriers to provision of flexible, supported opportunities for higher education outside the full-time University system.

6.3 Outline Programme

On current plans, the Workshop will run from the evening of Thursday May 16th to lunchtime on Saturday May 18th.

Date / time	Theme
May 16, evening	Informal discussion and review of this report
May 17, morning	Keynote address: Flexible Learning (Professor Rumble)
May 17, morning	1 Programmes and curricula
May 17, afternoon	2 Quality assurance
May 17, afternoon	3 Student support
May 17, evening	4 Inter-institutional collaboration
May 18, morning	5 Organisational re-structuring
May 18, morning	Decisions and follow-up plans

APPENDIX 1: PREPARATION AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Preparation

Prior to my (postponed) visit in August, 2001, each university was asked, via the UGC, to provide information about:

- the courses and programmes in the external studies schemes
- who the students are
- what course materials they receive
- how they are supported / tutored
- how they are assessed
- how the system is monitored..

A request was also made to include in the round of meetings, wherever feasible, not only the people in charge of the External Degree Programme/s in each university, but also staff involved in administration of the Programmes, in course materials preparation and distribution, and in tutoring and student support, as well as some representative students.

A request was also made for relevant documentation to be made available, such as any existing reports or studies held by the UGC relevant to the various Universities' External Degree Programmes, as well as, for each university, items such as:

- organisational charts showing the relation of External Degree provision to the rest of the University
- prospectuses or brochures about the External Degrees Programme
- examples of some typical course materials for external students
- any statistics on enrolment, drop-out, and pass rates for external students (compared to campus-based students)

Discussion points

Appropriate items from the following checklist were used to guide the discussions and meetings with the representatives from the Universities:

1. Courses and Programmes

1.1 Which programmes and subjects are included in the External Degree provision? And why these particular programmes / courses?

1.2. Are the assessment procedures the same for the external students and the full-time campus-based students on the same courses / programmes?

1.3 What are the fee levels for external students? How do they compare with fees for campus-based students?

1.4 What course materials are provided for external students?

1.5 Who prepares the external studies course materials (the same academics as are giving the campus courses, or others?) and what resources and help do they have; what incentives do they have?

1.6 Is there a special External Degrees / External Studies Department? If so, what staff does it have, how is it organised, what are its roles and responsibilities, what is its budget?

1.7 How do students obtain the course materials?

1.8 What dedicated financial resources are made available to the External Degrees Programme, where do they come from (external student fees only, or other sources as well?), and how are they managed and monitored?

2. Student profile

2.1. Demographics (how many external students in each course/ programme, what age, what gender, occupations, distribution : urban / rural)?

2.2. Motivation: what motivates people to opt for the External Degree programme instead of studying on-campus, full-time?

2.3. Learning factors (learning styles, independent study skills, previous experience of distance education)?

2.4 Subject background (previous knowledge of subject, previous qualifications required, relevant personal interests and skills)?

2.5. Resource factors (where do they mainly study, what study time/week do they have available, what access do they have to resources such as libraries, local centres, media, tutors etc)

2.6. How do they compare with campus-based students (what similarities, what differences compared to campus-based / fulltime students following the same subjects)?

2.7 How do success and drop-out rates compare with campus-based students on the same course / programme? If there is a big difference, what is it due to?

2.8 What statistics are available on student progress for external students (numbers entering per cohort, progression, drop-out rate, pass rates etc)?

2.9 Do/can some students switch from studying externally to studying on-campus (eg when changing from one course or year to another), and *vice-versa*, or are they two distinct student populations?

3. Student support

3.1 Are there counselling and advisory services (eg on course choice, vocational guidance, on study skills, on financial support, on special needs) specifically for external students?

3.2 Who are the tutors? What are their main roles? How are they recruited, trained, and paid?

3.3 What communication channels do students have to their tutors (face-to-face tutorials, post, telephone....?)

3.4 Are periodic contact sessions and face-to-face or residential programmes / laboratory sessions / fieldwork etc built into the course? If so, are they compulsory? What are the fees? Where are they held? Are special local centres available to students?

3.5 How is students' work assessed? Is there periodic assessment (eg monthly assignments with grades and feedback from tutors; so, what is the average turn-round

time on marking assignments?), or end-of- course exams only? How are exams organised and supervised?

3.6 What are the administrative procedures and record-keeping systems for the External students?

4. Quality assurance / Evaluation

4.1 What specific monitoring systems and procedures are there for assessing the effectiveness of external degree programmes and the quality of the courses and course materials (surveys, questionnaires, evaluations...)

4.2. How are enquiries, registrations, and admissions handled?

4.2 What records are kept about individual external students? Is there any data available on student progress and drop-out rates?

4.3 What are seen as the main problems and the main successes of the external degree system, its courses, and its students (eg as compared to the campus-based provision for the equivalent courses and programmes?)

APPENDIX 2: PROGRAMME OF MEETINGS AND VISITS

- Feb 17th Arrival in Colombo
- Feb 18th 11.30-15.00 Initial briefing at UGC with Professor BRRN Mendis and Professor KD Arulpragasam
- Feb 19th 09.30-14.00 Attendance at Sida/SAREC workshop
14.30-15.30 Meeting with Professor KD Arulpragasam at National Education Commission (NEC)
- Feb 20th 10.00 - 12.30 Meeting with Professor V K Samaranayake, Director, Institute of Computer Technology (ICT), University of Colombo, and Mrs G Gamage, Project Manager, External Examinations Unit, ICT
15.00- 18.00 Informal discussions with Professor BRRN Mendis and colleagues at UGC
- Feb 21st 12.30-14.30 Meeting with members of the UGC; lunch
- Feb 22nd 09.30-15.30 Visit to External Examinations Unit of ICT, and meeting with Mrs G Gamage (Project Manager) and staff involved in the *Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT)* External Degree Programme; visits to Institutes providing tutorial services to *BIT* Programme (*IDM Computer Studies (Pvt) Ltd; Skills Lanka; Royal Institute*)
- Feb 25th 09.00 - 16.30 Second Workshop with Directors / Coordinators of External Degree Programmes at UGC
(see *Appendix 3*)
- Feb 26th 09.30 - 11.30 Visit to University of Sri Jayawardenapura: meeting with Vice-Chancellor and with Mrs AR Siriwardena (Dep Reg, Ext Examinations), and colleagues; and representatives from the University, and from the National Youth Services Council 'Tharuna Seva Sarasaviya' (Youth Services University) programme.
- Feb 27th [*Public holiday*]
- Feb 28th (accompanied by Mrs H Gunawardena, UGC)
08.30-09.30 Visit to Vidyalankara Pirivena, Kelaniya, meeting with Director, Ven. Dr. W Kusaladhamma
10.00- 12.00 Visit to External Examinations Unit, University of Kelaniya; meeting with Prof K Tillekeratne, Vice-Chancellor, and with Prof VG Kulasena (Academic Coordinator of External Exams) and Dr S Amunugama (Dean, Fac Humanities), and staff of Ext Exams Unit

- 15.30-16.30 Visit to National Youth Services Council, Training, Research, and Development Division, Maharagama, and meeting with Mr P Gamage and colleagues
- March 1st 09.30-12.30 Visit to Open University; meetings with Prof Uma Coomaraswamy (Vice-Chancellor), Dr WAR Wijeratne (Acting Director, Educational Technology Division), and Dr J Liyanagama (Director, Regional Education Service); visit to Media Production Centre, Library, and Colombo Regional Centre
- March 4th 11.00- 14.00 Visit to University of Peradeniya, Kandy, accompanied by Mrs H Gunawardena, UGC; meetings with Dr D Mallikaarachchi (Director, External Exams) and colleagues, and with the Vice-Chancellor and Prof WM Sirisena (Dean, Arts Faculty) and Prof KG Goonasekera (Dean, Science Faculty)
14.30-15.30 Visit to OUSL Regional Centre, Kandy; meeting with Dr (Mrs) P. Daulagala, Senior Lecturer, Botany
- March 5th 10.00-12.30 Meeting with Prof Mendis and Prof Arulpragasam, to discuss draft report, at UGC
14.30-15.00 Meeting with Prof K Tillekeratne, Vice-Chancellor, University of Kelaniya (at UGC)
- March 6th 11.00-12.00 Meeting with Prof Suki Ekaratne, Staff Development Unit, University of Colombo
18.00 - 19.00 Meeting with Mr WA Jayawardena, First Director of the External Services Agency (ESA)
- March 7th
- March 8th Return to UK

UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION



2nd Workshop on External Degree Programmes in the Universities in Sri Lanka

25th February 2002

in the Board Room of the UGC

PROGRAMME

09.30 am – 09.45am Registration of Participants/Tea
Chairman, Prof KD Arulpragasam /Chairman of the Standing
Committee on Distance Education & External Degrees

09.45 am – 09.55 am Self-Introduction by Participants

09.55 am – 10.20am Welcome Address & Introduction to the Workshop:
Prof. B.R.R. N. Mendis, Chairman/UGC

10.20am – 10.40am Address by **Prof KD Arulpragasam**
Chairman of the Standing Committee on Distance Education & External
Degrees

10.40am – 11.10am Address by **Mr Anthony Kaye**, Consultant from
Commonwealth of Learning

11.10am – 11.40am General Discussion

11.40 am – 12.40 pm Presentations by the Coordinators/ Directors,
External Degree Programmes

- **Dr HCM Rajendra**, Dean, Faculty of Science, Eastern University of Sri
Lanka

- **Prof N Gnanakumaran**, Co-ordinator, External Registration &
Examinations Unit, University of Jaffna

- **Prof VG Kulasena**, Academic Co-ordinator, External Examinations,
University of Kelaniya

- **Prof VK Samaranayake**, Director, ICT

12.40 pm – 01.25 pm Buffet Lunch

- 01.25 pm – 02.25 pm Presentations by the Coordinators/ Directors,
External Degree Programme (cont)**
- Dr D Mallikaarachchi, Director, External Examinations, University of Peradeniya
 - Mr P Vithanage, Director, External Examinations, University of Ruhuna
 - Mr SS Naotuna, Co-ordinator, Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardanepura
 - Mr SACM Zuhyle, Director/Planning/UGC
- 02.25 pm- 03.00 pm General Discussion & Recommendations**
Chairman, Prof KD Arulpragasam, Chairman of the Standing
Committee on Distance Education & External Degrees
- 03.00 pm -Concluding Remarks**
Vote of thanks by Prof LL Ratnayake, Vice- Chairman/UGC
-

APPENDIX 3 (continued)

**2nd Workshop on External Degree Programmes of the Universities in
Sri Lanka
25th February 2002
in the Board Room of the UGC**

Participants

1. Prof BRRN Mendis, Chairman/UGC
2. Prof LL Ratnayake , Vice-Chairman/UGC
3. Prof KD Arulpragasam, Member/UGC, (Chairman/ Standing Committee)
4. Mrs CS Karunaratne, Secretary/UGC
5. Mr SACM Zuhyle, Director/Planning/UGC
6. Mr Anthony Kaye, Consultant, Commonwealth of Learning

University of Colombo

7. Prof VK Samaranayake, Director, ICT
8. Mrs GI Gamage, Project Manager/ ICT
9. Mrs N PererA, Head/Department of Law

Eastern University of Sri Lanka

10. Dr HCM Rajendra, Dean/ Faculty of Science
11. Mrs A Murugathas, Dean/ Faculty of Arts
12. Mr S Senthilanathan, Dean/Faculty of Commerce & Management

University of Jaffna

- 13 Prof N Gnanakumaran, Academic Co-ordinator /External Examinations

University of Kelaniya

14. Prof VG Kulasena , Academic Co-ordinator/ External Examinations
15. Dr Sarath Amunugama , Head/ Dept. of Modern Languages

Open University of Sri Lanka

16. Prof(Mrs) U Coomaraswamy, Vice-Chancellor
- 17 Dr(Mrs) WAR Wijeratne, Director/ Education Technology
- 18 Prof. (Miss) GIC Gunawardene , Dean/ Humanities & So. Sc.
- 19 Prof HD Gunathilake, Dean / Engineering Technology

University of Peradeniya

20. Dr Desmond Mallikaarachchi, Director/ External Examinations

University of Ruhuna

21. Mr P Vithanage, Director/ External Examinations

University of Sri Jayewardanepura

22. Mr E Dayaratne, Dept. of Commerce
23. Mr SS Naotunna, Co-ordinator/ Commerce
24. Mr Pathmasiri Kannangara, Co-ordinator/Arts
25. Coordinator/Business Administration
26. Mrs AR Siriwardene, Deputy Registrar/ External Examinations
27. Prof RN de Fonseka

In Attendance

28. Mr MA Munidasa, Additional Secretary/IUA
29. Mrs Hiranthi Gunawardana, PS to the Chairman
30. Mrs Hilda Abeysekera, Stenographer
31. Mrs Shiromi Rajasuriya, Clerk

APPENDIX 4 : THE EXTERNAL DEGREE PROGRAMMES

Six Universities and one University Institute conduct External Degree Programmes [figures in parentheses show total numbers of external students registered, according to the figures supplied by each institution; although it is not always clear how many of these are 'live']:

- Eastern University of Sri Lanka [725]
 - University of Jaffna [16,045]
 - University of Kelaniya [34,578]
 - University of Peradeniya [60,000]
 - University of Ruhuna [8,305]
 - University of Sri Jayawardenapura [40,188]
 - University of Colombo, Institute of Computer Technology* [6,571]
- *(see *Appendix 5*)

Overall total numbers of students registered on External Degrees: 166,412

Basic summary information about the programmes conducted by each institution is tabulated below. This is mainly derived from the papers presented at the *First Workshop on External Degree Programmes* organised by the UGC on August 1st, 2001, and updated and complemented by the presentations at the *Second Workshop* on February 25th, 2002, and by my follow-up visits to several of the institutions.

Some of the tables that follow are incomplete, because not all the information needed was available at the time, and because they represent summaries of some of the key points for comparison, extracted from - in some cases - the more comprehensive presentations made at the two Workshops.

University	<i>Eastern University of Sri Lanka</i>
Degrees	B.A., BBA/B.COM, B.Sc, B.Sc (Agric)
Diplomas	Marketing Management Business Admin Accountancy and Financial Management
Nos (2001)	725 total reg., of which 214 enrolled in 2001
Dedicated staff (Ext Exams Unit)	5 (Asst Registrar, 2 clerks, 1 technician, 1 labourer)
Fees	For Science: - reg fee: Rs 300 / academic year - exam fees : Rs 75/subject (theory)/ Rs 225/subject (practical) - tuition fees : Rs 3000 / academic year
Course materials	Access to limited library facilities
Student support	Intro seminars at start of each subject (Arts) Seminars and practicals for Science and Agric.
Constraints	Delays in release of exam results
Suggestions	Accredited external agencies needed to conduct (practical) classes and provide tuition Students who qualify in year 1 should be offered the chance to enrol as internal students ED should be conducted in stages (Cert, Dip, Degree) Academic staff training in running ED and in teaching methods needed Teaching materials needed for ED ED calendar should not interfere with internal calendar Staff payments for working on ED and for script-marking should be increased Some appreciation should be given to academic staff working on external degree programmes

University	<i>Jaffna</i>
Degrees	BA(Gen), BA(Sp), started 1990 B.Com, started 1990 B.Dance, B.Music, started 1997
Nos. (2001)*	16,045 total reg., 1287 enrolled in 2000 (Arts:1128/ Commerce: 159)
Dedicated staff (Ext Exams Unit)	5 (1 Coord'r, 1 Asst Registrar, 2 clerks, 1 lab'r)
Fees	Registration: Rs 500 Exam : Rs 750
Course materials	
Student support	
Constraints	Shortage of infrastructure (land, building, equipment, library, exam hall...) Delays in release of exam results because of inadequate nos of script markers
Suggestions	Courses in Science, Maths, and Statistics should be added to the EDP Certificate courses should be started Bankers Exams should be included Additional exam centres should be established at Mannar and Trincomalee Modules should be prepared for each subject Seminars and workshops for registered students should be conducted periodically

University	<i>Kelaniya</i>
Degrees	BA (Gen), BA (Sp), BBM (Gen), BCom(Sp), BSc(Gen)
Nos (2001)	34,578 registered, of which 2,487 enrolled in 2001
Dedicated staff (Ext Exams Unit)	9 (Academic Coord'r, 8 (?) clerks...)
Fees	Registration (Gen / Spec): Rs 750 /1000 Exams (First/Pts I,II,II) : Rs 600 / Rs 750 Student handbook & Reg App: Rs 300
Course materials	Outline syllabus for each Exam (Rs 50)
Student support	Students pay for tuition classes privately
Constraints	Serious backlog in marking exam scripts Inadequate data-processing facilities for tracking students and recording exam results
Suggestions	Introduce adequate guidance and support services (eg seminars before exams) for students Appropriate payments to academic staff for exam marking Allow the External Exams Branch to use the fee income for improving the EDP Regularise the post of Academic Coordinator/ Director of EDP (should be an <i>ex officio</i> member of Senate) Introduce pre-requisites for certain subjects Introduce new areas of study corresponding to (employment-related) demand Regional centres with library and IT facilities

University	<i>Peradeniya</i>
Degrees	BA(Gen), BA(Sp), started in 1979, continuing BSc(Gen), started in 1979; terminated by 1999 due to practical problems in conducting exams
Nos (2001)	60,000 registered, of whom 8,500 registered in 2001(1st,Arts)
Dedicated staff (Ext Exams Unit)	35 (Dir, SAB, AR, 27 clerks, 3 peons, driver, lab'r)
Fees	Reg App form: Rs 100 Registration : Rs 800 Student Guide Book : Rs 80 Exams (1st in Arts/ Gen Arts) : Rs 800 / 120 (eg a total of c. Rs 2500 for a BA (Gen))
Course materials	Outline syllabus for each Exam (Rs 10) Past exam papers (Rs 10) (but see 'Suggestions' below)
Student support	Occasional exam preparation seminars (but see 'Suggestions' below)
Constraints	Major delays in releasing exam results, in the past; but this problem is now under control (Dec 2000 results released in 6 months... a record)
Suggestions	Proposals for improving EDP have been included in the current 5 year plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a system to release exam results within four months of exams - a new Exam Centre in Anuradhapura - monthly seminars for students - a Printing Unit at the Ext Exams Branch (EEB)to produce modules and course introductions - a Library for ext students (1000 books already collected) - a sales counter at the EEB for ext students to buy necessary reading materials <p>New courses should be introduced corresponding to student needs (eg a Diploma course in English)</p>

University	<i>Ruhuna</i>
Degrees	BA (Gen) (started in 1997)
Nos (2001)	8305
Completion rate	25% - 30% overall
Dedicated staff (Ext Exams Unit)	4 (Director, 1 clerk, 2 lab'rs)
Fees	Total/candidate/degree: Rs 3000 (reg'n + exam'n) Registration : Rs 600 Exam fees : 1st Arts/ PtI/ PtII : Rs 500/600/750
Course materials	
Student support	
Constraints	Insufficient staff to run the Unit
Suggestions	Provide seminars, modules, and library facilities to external students Introduce courses in Management, IT, Finance, Banking Introduce short-term Certificate and Diploma courses

University	<i>Sri Jayewardenepura</i>
Degrees	BCom(Gen), BCom(Sp), commenced in 1972 BA(Gen), commenced in 1991 BSc Business Admin(Gen), commenced 1997 BSc Man'gt (Public)(Gen), commenced 1997
Nos (2001)	40,188 reg, of which 9,010 enrolled in 2001
Dedicated staff (Ext Exams Unit)	15 (1DepReg, 1 Ass't Bursar, 10 clerical, 1 DP operator, 2 lab'rs)
Fees	BA Rs 2600 total; others Rs 4000 total
Course materials	Student handbooks Outline syllabus for each subject Past Exam papers (Rs 200)
Student support	Degree guidance classes Mid-year and end-year seminars Tharuna Seva Sarasaviya Programme
Constraints	Inadequate staff, accommodation, and equipment for the Unit Strict University rules and regulations which inhibit innovation No incentives to take on extra work Inadequate payment for exam marking No dedicated exam halls No library facilities for external students
Suggestions	Set up a comprehensive exam question data-base Produce comprehensive handbooks for EDP courses Set up an Information and Support service Pay academic staff to revise syllabuses, and prepare student support materials Create links with foreign universities, and with potential foreign donors for teaching equipment and textbooks Provide foreign scholarships, fellowships and visits to motivate staff involved in the EDP

APPENDIX 5 : THE BACHELOR IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The *Bachelor in Information Technology* programme run by the Institute of Computer Technology at the University of Colombo deserves special consideration.

(1) It is a new programme, its first intake being in 2001, and is specially designed to cater to the country's demand for IT graduates both amongst those wishing to start a career in this area, and amongst existing IT professionals needing a degree in IT. Furthermore, it is the first major public initiative in Sri Lanka in this field, and presents an economical alternative to private sector degree programmes or to overseas study.

(2) Being a new programme, it has been designed in accordance with the curriculum reforms being introduced into the Universities: it is based on a semester system, has a modular, credit-based structure, with formal assessment at the end of each module, and the possibility of obtaining intermediate Certificates (eg on satisfactory completion of the first eight modules). There is no equivalent on-campus, internal, programme: the BIT can only be obtained externally. In all these respects, it differs significantly from the other external degree programmes.

(3) As the programme is run by the ICT, and given the special status of Institutes in the University system, there is a relative degree of autonomy in the organisation and management of the programme, and particularly in the use of fee income to support its development. This relative autonomy has helped make it possible to involve academic staff from ICT and other parts of the University, as well as obtaining industry support, for the development of the curriculum.

(4) The learning materials and guidance provided to students is more comprehensive than for other external degrees, and includes:

- a detailed printed syllabus for each year (with learning objectives, guidance on teaching hours for each topic, recommended reading, and practical work tasks)
- exam papers with example test questions and model answers
- a Web site with revision materials and MCQs / quizzes, FAQs, some course materials, links to relevant external URLs, updates, and information on teaching institutes, with their respective pass rates
- a weekly half-hour TV programme each Thursday evening.

(5) Assessment procedures differ markedly from those on the other external degree programmes:

- students are selected for entry on the basis of an aptitude test
- the first year exams are composed of MCQ papers, which are machine-marked on equipment used for school level exams; this marking can be done in a matter of hours, so there is no delay in release of results
- second year exams are a combination of MCQ's and structured free response questions
- the third year exam includes the submission of a project report based on work carried out during the year (eg related to the student's professional interests).

(6) Although ICT does not officially endorse or accredit the private institutes which teach for the *BIT*, it keeps details of the 100 or so institutes involved, and makes this information available to prospective students, with pass rates, on the BIT Website.

Institute	<i>Institute of Computer Technology (ICT), University of Colombo</i>
Degree	<i>Bachelor in Information Technology</i> (started 2001) <i>Intermediate Certificates</i>
Nos	2001: 4,560 selected (2,647 still 'active') 2002 : 3,924 selected (out of c. 8,000 applicants)
Dedicated staff (Ext Exams Unit)	11 (1 f/t coordinator, 1 sec, 9 day-clerks) (+ p/t academic / subject coordinators from ICT)
Fees (Year 1)	Selection test: Rs 400 Annual Reg'n fee: Rs 1000 Exam fee / module: Rs 800 (8 modules) Detailed syllabus : Rs 100
Course materials	Outline syllabus Reading lists (set books to be purchased) Detailed syllabus for each subject with learning objectives and guidance study times / section Dedicated BIT Website with: - exam schedules - revision materials and MCQs / quizzes - FAQs - some course materials - links to relevant external URLs - updates - information on teaching institutes Weekly 30 min TV programme
Student support	Applicants have to pass an aptitude test Students enrol in private IT Institutes for tutorial classes (about 100 Institutes involved) Tuition fees c. Rs 18,000 / semester
Comments	Programme is intensive, is equivalent to full-time study - may pose problems for employed students Progress year 1 > year 2 is low (500 out of 4500 registered Yr 1 students have > Year 2 so far; only 171 of the 1690 who sat all 8 yr1 module exams gained the Certificate

APPENDIX 6 : DOCUMENTS CONSULTED

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