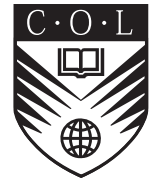


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PREST

Practitioner Research and
Evaluation Skills Training in
Open and Distance Learning

User Guide

The PREST training resources aim to help open and distance learning practitioners develop and extend their research and evaluation skills. They can be used on a self-study basis or by training providers. The resources consist of two sets of materials: a six-module foundation course in research and evaluation skills and six handbooks in specific research areas of ODL. There is an accompanying user guide. A full list appears on the back cover.

The print-based materials are freely downloadable from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) website (www.col.org/prest). Providers wishing to print and bind copies can apply for camera-ready copy which includes colour covers (info@col.org). They were developed by the International Research Foundation for Open Learning (www.irfol.ac.uk) on behalf of COL.

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PREST User Guide

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Permissions

See the last page of the module.

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User guide

The PREST materials

The *Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training* (PREST) materials aim to make available free research skills training in contexts with limited opportunities for staff development and in particular to help distance educators with limited research experience conduct principled and systematic research and evaluation. The resources have two objectives: to promote research and evaluation as a key part of professional development to be undertaken by all ODL practitioners rather than as the preserve of a privileged few; to encourage ODL practitioners to become active producers rather than passive consumers of research and evaluation.

The print-based materials are innovative in several ways. *First*, the content and level of the materials were determined by means of an in-depth consultation phase among different types of ODL practitioners, working in ODL institutions, ministries, NGOs and with different target groups, through questionnaires, interviews, research partnerships and consultation with a range of informed stakeholders. The resources fill an identified gap in training provision for first-rung practical research and evaluation skills training for working ODL practitioners. The immediacy of work-based problems they encounter creates an opportunity for practitioner research and evaluation, an area not well catered for at all by MA or PhD courses. The materials aim to provide a grounding in research and evaluation skills of immediate relevance to their work and which will also put learners in a better position to progress to higher level research programmes and qualifications.

Second, the PREST materials draw on research and evaluation methods from education and social science but, unlike most generalist research skills training courses and handbooks, they use illustrative examples from contexts of open and distance, and have been written *for* ODL practitioners *by* ODL research and evaluation experts. Authors and critical readers were chosen throughout the world on the basis of their expertise in research and evaluation, their understanding of developing-country contexts and their knowledge of ODL contexts.

Third, unlike fee-paying programmes the print-based materials are freely downloadable from the (non-password protected) Commonwealth of Learning website (www.col.org/prest). Camera-ready copy and coloured covers are available on request to those users wishing to print and bind the materials themselves.

Fourth, the flexible materials are aimed at two target groups: ODL practitioners wanting self-study or reference materials *and* training providers looking for flexible research training resources to integrate into a variety of training contexts.

The modules and handbooks

The programme consists of *two* sets/levels of learning materials: six core modules which, together, form a small foundation course in research and evaluation methods explored within ODL contexts; six handbooks – a collection of stand-alone interactive guides to conducting research and evaluation in a particular field of ODL.

The core

The core part of the PREST programme consists of six modules:

A1: *Doing educational research and evaluation in ODL* – Author: Alan Woodley.

A2: *Planning research and evaluation* – Author: Anna Robinson-Pant.

A3: *Getting and analysing quantitative data* – Author: Alan Woodley.

A4: *Getting and analysing qualitative data* – Author: Rob Walker.

A5: *Mixed research methods* – Authors: Christine Spratt, Rob Walker and Bernadette Robinson.

A6: *Reporting research to support or influence change* – Authors: Janet Stuart and Colin Latchem.

These six modules represent the basic knowledge and skills that would be needed by most researchers working in ODL, providing them with three modules on overall process, planning and reporting (1, 2 and 6) and three on methods (3, 4 and 5). They will help a practitioner work through a personal piece of research or evaluation from identifying research questions through to reporting on their work.

Additionally, the modules are supported by a range of other resource material that can also be downloaded from the COL website. These materials consist of journal articles, book chapters and similar materials and, in the case of A3 (*Getting and analysing quantitative data*), includes some *Excel* worksheets complete with activities.

The handbooks

The six handbooks each deal with a more specific aspect of ODL research. Some practitioners may already know what area they wish to conduct some research or evaluation in and wish to start immediately. Some researchers might need different handbooks at different stages of their research careers:

B1: *Using programme monitoring in research and evaluation* – Author: Neil Butcher.

B2: *Measuring outcomes* – Author: Charles Potter.

B3: *Cost and economics of open and distance learning* – Author: Hilary Perraton.

B4: *Programme evaluation and its role in quality assurance* – Author: Merridy Strydom-Wilson.

B5: *Researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners* – Authors: Barbara Spronk and Jason Pennels.

B6: *Researching tutoring and learner support* – Author: Jane Brindley.

Study hours

The modules will generally need a minimum of about 20 hours of study, although A3 will need a minimum of 40 hours. Exactly how long you need will depend both on how fast you work and on the depth to which you wish to pursue various topics. We suggest therefore that you approach each module in the expectation that you will need 20-30 hours (40+ hours for A3).

The handbooks also generally need a minimum of 20 hours study, although B1 is a bit longer and B3 is a good deal shorter. We suggest therefore that you approach each handbook in the expectation that you will need 20-30 hours (10-15 hours for B3).

More detailed timings are given in the introduction to each module and handbook but these are general guidelines and will depend on individual learning pace.

Module/handbook format

The modules and handbooks generally follow the same pattern, each being divided into a small number of study units, and each unit being made up of:

- ▶ an introductory paragraph or two that provide an overview of the unit, its focus and outcomes
- ▶ one or more activities for you to engage in, such as readings to complete and analyse, questions to answer; or problems to solve
- ▶ a commentary on these responses that takes you deeper into the topic by providing new information and suggesting further reading
- ▶ feedback on your responses to the questions or problems posed in each activity.

The handbooks also assume that you are working your way through some kind of work-based research project and therefore contain advice on applying what you are learning to that project. (You can, though, study the modules even if you are not working on a research project.)

Who the materials are for

The materials are aimed at two target groups:

- 1 individual or small groups of distance practitioners who wish to develop their research skills using self-study materials
- 2 training providers looking for flexible research training resources to integrate into face-to-face workshops or to adapt them as part of a course.

As you will see, the six handbooks make use of *pen portraits* of seven imaginary researchers, each chosen to represent a different ODL research situation. We hope that most, if not all, learners who use the PREST materials will find at least one pen portrait that reasonably represents their situation. As the modules progress, students can see how the ideas and methods might be used by various of the pen portrait researchers. The pen portraits reflect the research needs of seven ODL practitioners working in different institutional contexts and areas of education and with different levels of support for their research. Three work in different types of NGO, two within a Ministry of Education and the last two in different types of open universities. Full descriptions of these seven researchers can be found in Appendix 1.

Modes of use

The resources can be used directly by learners or mediated in a variety of ways by training providers. These approaches are discussed below.

Use by individual learners

The materials as they stand can be used directly by individual learners and do not assume any mediation. In this way they might be used for:

- ▶ self-study by individual or small groups of ODL work colleagues
- ▶ as reference materials for work-based ODL practitioners with immediate research and evaluation tasks
- ▶ as reference materials for learners conducting an ODL-based research project on a formal course
- ▶ as reference materials for virtual research networks.

Use by training providers

The materials can also be incorporated into existing training programmes or be used as the basis for new ODL programmes. For example, they could be used as:

- ▶ support materials for training providers in face-to-face workshops
- ▶ support materials for training providers running virtual research networks

- ▶ support materials for training providers to recommend to learners conducting an ODL-based research project on a formal course
- ▶ as the basis for courses (non-accredited or accredited, adopted without changing or versioned).

Use as resource or course materials

Some users will only want to use particular modules or handbooks. Other users may want to treat the materials as a course. The design of the materials facilitates both, as in the following examples of possible ways of using the materials:

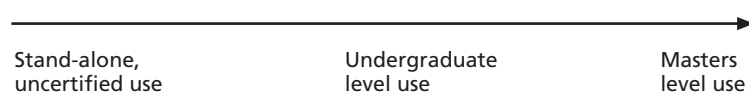
- 1 As a course in ODL research methods.** This might be done by using all the core modules plus one handbook as an elective subject.
- 2 For a series of workshops on data methods.** This could be achieved by using all or parts of A3, A4 and A5 as the basis of workshop sessions. Some activities could be modified for group work and other activities could be added to suit the needs of the particular group.
- 3 As support for a personal research project.** For example, an ODL tutor might decide to undertake a personal research project and use B6 as a source of guidance.
- 4 As the basis for an online study group.** A group (with or without a moderator) might set up an online study group on planning research, using A2 as their core text.

Modifying the depth and breadth of the materials

According to the level at which you might wish to use the materials and the proportion of your course that is dependent on the PREST materials rather than your own organisation's input, you may need to consider adding various materials. The depth and breadth of any one module (or of a collection of modules) can be extended by adding:

- ▶ more readings
- ▶ a more extensive project
- ▶ assignments.

For example, a 20-hour module can become a 40-hour module by the addition of two 2.5 hour assignments and 15 hour project. Or, the depth of a module can be extended by adding a few substantial case studies for critical studies. In other words, according to the mix of modules, assignments, projects and other tasks that you use, the modules can be placed at any point that you choose on following continuum:



Adding certification

There is no set certification for the use of the PREST materials but, with permission from Commonwealth of Learning, you are free to add your own certification and to seek accreditation as you see fit for your students. The existing research project that runs through the six modules could be expanded and made more formal as a basis for accreditation, or you could set your own independent tasks.

The module and handbook outcomes

The full range of what PREST covers can be seen in the outcomes of the modules and units, as follows:

Module A1 Doing educational research and evaluation in ODL helps students to:

- ▶ use the concepts of practitioner research and evaluation in the context of ODL
- ▶ think in a critical way about what research is, the range of activities it covers and why people do it
- ▶ be aware of the importance of the social and political context in which practitioner research takes place
- ▶ think about how these matters relate to their work situation
- ▶ begin to plan a research project based on their own institution – this plan is continued through the other modules.

Module A2 (Planning research and evaluation)

helps students to:

- ▶ prepare a detailed research proposal and apply for funding
- ▶ use their proposal as a basis for planning their research activities in detail
- ▶ justify their chosen research approach and plan, taking into account issues around bias, validity and ethics.

Module A3 Getting and analysing quantitative data

helps students to:

- ▶ use the concepts and techniques of quantitative research methods in the context of ODL
- ▶ understand that facts involving quantitative data are 'socially constructed' and to examine the underlying processes involved

- ▶ analyse other people's data and appreciate how and why secondary analysis of external quantitative data needs to be done with care in order to extract meaningful information from such data
- ▶ analyse quantitative institutional data (e.g. data on students, their courses and their marks) that already exist in order to extract meaning and information from that data, using methods such as averages, measures of spread and trend analysis
- ▶ develop the skills of doing institutional research from scratch, including looking at how to decide what data to collect, which methods to use and how to design data collection instruments so that they will yield valid and reliable results.

Module A4 Getting and analysing qualitative data

helps students to:

- ▶ know what can be learnt from small-scale qualitative research studies in education
- ▶ identify the research questions that can be addressed by qualitative research.
- ▶ be aware of what is involved in doing small scale qualitative studies in an applied or evaluation context and have ideas, strategies and methods to use to frame the study, collect and analyse the data
- ▶ use different ways of collecting and analysing information (particularly through interviewing, observation and analysis of documents).

Module A5 Mixed research methods

helps students to:

- ▶ explain what mixed methods are
- ▶ examine the issues involved in using mixed methods
- ▶ show how different research methods can be used in combination, and provide examples
- ▶ identify the problems and advantages in using them
- ▶ follow some practical guidelines for researchers.

Module A6 Reporting research to support or influence change

helps students to:

- ▶ identify ways in which their research and evaluation findings can inform and influence thinking, policies and practices in ODL

- ▶ prepare and present their research findings in ways that are clear and coherent and appropriate for different types of audience
- ▶ discuss the research-practice divide, its causes and how to bridge it
- ▶ use their research to inform and influence thinking, policies and practices in their work context.

Handbook B1 Using programme monitoring in research and evaluation

helps students to:

- ▶ differentiate between monitoring and evaluation
- ▶ define what kinds of monitoring information need to be gathered to inform research and evaluation of an ODL programme and for what purposes
- ▶ identify and analyse appropriate methods to gather that information
- ▶ map the systems required to manage that information efficiently, and define the reporting requirements of programme monitoring systems
- ▶ apply the outputs of programme monitoring systems in support of research and evaluation processes
- ▶ describe how research and evaluation drawing on programme monitoring data can improve educational delivery.

Handbook B2 Measuring outcomes

helps students to:

- ▶ establish whether programmes achieve their objectives
- ▶ identify the importance of outcomes in programmes
- ▶ identify which objectives and outcomes they consider to be important in a programmes
- ▶ identify which types of information can show whether a programme has met its objectives
- ▶ explain why is it important to work with programme stakeholders in gathering information about a programme and its outcomes
- ▶ identify how information about a programme's objectives and outcomes help in improving a programme
- ▶ identify how information about a programme's objectives and outcomes help in planning for the future

Handbook B3 Cost and economics of open and distance learning

helps students to:

- ▶ explain why costing is worth doing and the stages involved in doing it
- ▶ locate the data needed for costing
- ▶ distinguish between recurrent and capital costs and between variable and fixed costs
- ▶ cost one element within a course
- ▶ cost a programme or a whole institution
- ▶ develop and use cost functions.

Handbook B4 Programme evaluation and its role in quality assurance

helps students to:

- ▶ define the purpose of an evaluation process and prioritise the key questions that the evaluation will need to answer
- ▶ select appropriate methods for gathering the necessary data for a good quality and practically useful evaluation of a distance education programme
- ▶ identify the characteristics of effective evaluation processes and factors that are most likely to impede successful implementation of an evaluation
- ▶ define the reporting requirements of an effective evaluation process
- ▶ describe the relationships between programme evaluation and quality assurance
- ▶ plan an evaluation study.

Handbook B5 Researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners

helps students to:

- ▶ define the terms 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged' as they apply in particular to learners
- ▶ explore various approaches to researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners
- ▶ familiarise ODL practitioners with participatory action research (PAR)
- ▶ enable ODL practitioners to use this strategy to research issues arising from provision of ODL to marginalised and disadvantaged learners.

Handbook B6 Researching tutoring and learner support

helps students to:

- ▶ define research questions appropriate to their context
- ▶ identify the methodology which best fits their research aims and context
- ▶ gather the background information needed for their research
- ▶ choose an appropriate research design
- ▶ implement and manage their project
- ▶ report on their results.

Publication details

The PREST resources can be used on a self-study basis or by training providers. They are available, free of charge, from the Commonwealth of Learning website. Providers wishing to print and bind copies of the materials can apply to COL for camera-ready copy (which includes a colour front and back page).

Permission is granted to use and/or modify the material for use by third parties on condition that attribution to COL is retained, that their use is strictly for non-commercial purposes and not for resale. Training providers wishing to version the materials may request the electronic copies of the materials directly from COL, but must follow COL's rules on copyright matters.

The materials were developed by the International Research Foundation for Open Learning (IRFOL) on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL).

Tell us what you think

We would like to know how you are using the PREST materials, what you think of them and how they could be improved. We would be very grateful if you could take the time to let us know, using the following questionnaire which you could then post to us. Alternatively there is online version on the PREST page www.col.org/prest.

4 Please tell us which aspects of the PREST materials have been least useful to you

5 In what ways do you think the PREST materials could be improved or extended?

6 Please tell us a little about yourself

What is your current job? _____

In what sort of unit or department do you work? e.g. Faculty of Education _____

What is the total number of people in your unit or department who undertake ODL research? _____

What are your current research and evaluation responsibilities? _____

Do you have qualifications in research and if so, what are they? _____

Thank you for your time. You may provide your name and contact details below *if you wish*. This would help us to come back to you, for example to direct you to new research resources or to follow up on some of your points.

Name _____

Work address _____

Work phone no and fax _____

Email _____

Please detach the questionnaire and send by post to:
The Training Programme Manager, Commonwealth of Learning, 1055 West Hastings Street, Suite 1200,
Vancouver BC, V6E 2E9, Canada

Appendix 1: The pen portraits

NGO

Zobaida

Zobaida is in her late twenties and has a BA in sociology from Dhaka University. She is married with two children. She would like to study for a master's degree in development studies for career mobility, but because of her job and family commitments she can not attend university full time. She has looked at the possibility of studying through distance education.

Zobaida works with an international non-governmental organisation in Dhaka whose aim is to increase access to basic education for girls in Bangladesh, in a culturally sensitive way. *Zobaida* has been asked by her project director to document the regions in Bangladesh where enrolment is lowest and to conduct interviews with out-of-school girls.

She has been allocated a travel grant to visit these areas and to find out why so many girls have dropped out of school. She has been asked to put together a report on her findings and to make a presentation at a meeting in front of her donors in two months. She has never been asked to write a brief, succinct report; her previous experience has been essays and a dissertation. Because of limited time and cost, she has to collect her data rapidly. The research skills she learned at university were mainly literature searches and 'desk' work, she has very limited skills or experience in first-hand field research.

Because of limited time and limited research experience, she needs to know what type of research methods she should use to help her with this report (e.g. focus groups discussions, case-studies, interviews, descriptive vignettes — questionnaires would take too long to devise, pre-test, etc. so she is looking for simple straightforward research techniques). She also needs pointers to help her write in a clear and concise way such as clear guidelines on how to sum up main points, e.g. in an executive summary. She has access to the education statistics from the Ministry of Education but they are in table form. She wants to find out the best way to present the statistics in a more interesting/illustrative way. (Should she use bar charts? Age pyramids? For example, how can she illustrate at what age and class girls drop out? Is there a pattern by region?)

Zobaida has access to a shared computer at work and is able to use the internet only occasionally. Her computing skills are basic and she has no knowledge of statistics and cannot use *Excel* or *Access*.

Fancy

Botswana is a prosperous African country with a stable government, good infrastructure, and good education system. Despite this, it also has one of the

highest rates of Aids/HIV infections in the world. As the AIDS pandemic spreads throughout the country, the number of AIDS orphans increases. A growing concern of the government is how to educate these children.

Fancy is in her late twenties and works with a small non-governmental health organisation in Botswana. She is married with 3 children and her partner has tested HIV positive. She has a BSc in Biology and a Masters in Epidemiology. She has been asked by the Ministries of Health and Education to examine alternative modes of schooling which can cater to the growing number of AIDS orphans throughout the country, especially amongst the most marginalised communities.

Fancy has a scientific background and her previous research has been on health and nutrition. She is up-to-date with the recent literature on the medical research done on AIDS but she is not 'au fait' with the education literature. She needs to immerse herself in the education literature and to see what literature exists on alternative modes of schooling, especially for AIDS orphans. How does she go about it? How can she find out about open schooling? Inter-active radio broadcasts? Community schools? Are they successful? Costly? What models exist and can they be adapted to the Botswana context?

Another factor is that she will need to find out more about the 'marginalised' communities. She needs to find out more about the San (bushmen) whose livelihood is continually coming under threat. What culturally accepted strategies can be adapted to meet the needs of their livelihood which is hunting and gathering? (Look at ethnographic literature; compare/contrast what has been done with nomads.) In addition, what of the growing number of refugee camps and the aids orphans there?

Fancy has an enormous task ahead of her, but she has a computer at work as well as at home. She also has access to the University of Botswana library. The libraries are located at the Ministry of Education and Health and funding is available to hire a research assistant if necessary. She has excellent quantitative skills, but lacks qualitative methodology.

Venkamma

Venkamma works with an NGO in Hyderabad working on educational reforms to help prisoners. She is a dynamic woman dedicated to helping others. She is 25 years old, single, and living with her parents. She contracted polio during childhood, but despite being in a wheelchair she completed a degree in economics and is currently working on a master's degree at BRAOU in psychology. She has been asked by the Dean to put a report together on the potential use of distance education in prisons. He has asked her to put together a profile of the educational level of the prisoners and to find out what subjects would be the most beneficial for the prisoners. He has also recommended that she conduct some semi-structured interviews with

the prisoners. She hopes to use this research as the basis for her application to continue for a PhD dissertation.

She has excellent quantitative skills, but needs assistance in putting together a questionnaire. She is limited in her mobility, but she has 24 hour access to computing.

Kindly supplied by Dr Alicia Fentiman, Research Fellow for Basic Education, International Research Foundation for Open Learning, UK.

Ministry of Education

The Minister of Education in the Republic of Nuime is concerned to put his country on the map as far as open and distance learning is concerned. He is new to this Ministry but he's heard people at various international conferences and meetings describe how open and distance learning and technology can help address issues of access and equity and developing countries catch up with developed nations. He's also been told that it can be more cost-effective than the traditional means of delivery. His commitment (or ambition) tends to exceed his understanding of the issues, but he wants results – fast. There are political expediencies to consider. There's an election coming up and he has to help his Prime Minister show that education is truly serving the socio-economic development of this small island nation, and try to justify and if possible increase his department's budget. He approaches two middle-ranking officers in the Ministry of Education, *Yahaya* and *Agatha*.

Yahaya

Yahaya is in his mid-to late forties. He studied Economics to Master's level in the UK about 12 years ago. He's only recently transferred into the Ministry of Education from the Ministry of Economic Development, is seen as having a great potential and is likely to move onwards and upwards in the public service. The Minister has asked him to conduct a study into the national take-up and drop-out rates in distance education courses provided by the country's dual-modal university, two technical institutes and teachers' college. The Minister is wondering whether additional expenditure on these particular initiatives is justified or whether the extra resources might be better granted to develop an open schooling system, making up for deficiencies in the current primary school system.

Yahaya has access to computers, a fairly efficient data information system, and people who can help him gather up the data and compile the statistics. He conducted research for his Master's degree and is relatively happy about the quantifiable aspects of the study, but knows little about education, even less about distance education, and even less about how to handle the qualitative aspects of his research. He has access to a fairly basic Government library and the Internet but has only limited access to and knowledge of up-to-date literature on open and distance learning systems. He also has very little idea

about how to start his study, what questions to ask, who and where to go to for the answers, and what methods to adopt.

Agatha

Agatha has been asked by the Minister to look at the case for open schooling. Universal schooling has never been achieved and now the country and its teachers are being devastated by AIDS. The Minister wants to know the extent of the needs and whether open schooling would be an effective and cost-effective way of addressing this issue and whether there are technological solutions to improving access to the relatively few well-qualified teachers.

Agatha is in her early thirties. She was originally trained as a primary teacher at the Nuime Teachers' College and understands the basic principles and needs of education. However, she knows little or nothing about formal research techniques, open schooling, costing or technology. She is also a product of a culture that doesn't ask difficult questions for fear of making others lose face, revealing deficiencies in the system and treading on sensitive political toes. Yet *Agatha* knows that she cannot escape her professional responsibilities if she is to advance her career and achieve her own personal goals.

Agatha also has a personal agenda. She wants to pursue a master's degree in education and she feels that this experience will help her upgrade her knowledge and skills so that she can move on to more advanced formal study. Like *Yahaya*, she can call on the basic human and technical resources, but currently lacks the competencies and confidence to undertake this work. She is married with two children. She has considerable household duties which often make working and study at home difficult.

Kindly supplied by Professor Colin Latchem, ODL Consultant.

Open universities

Kabir Shastry

Kabir Shastry is a lecturer at the Open University of Udair (OUU) at the Department of Education. *Kabir* has been employed at the OUU for the past 12 years, joining immediately after he completed his Bachelors of Education degree from Udair University. Since then he has completed the short course on Distance Education for Development at IEC. Although *Kabir* has not had much research experience, he is quite enthusiastic to undertake research.

Research at OUU is very adhoc and individualised. The establishment of a research unit has been discussed for a while, but there is little commitment to its establishment and political changes at the top ensure that the project is continually shelved. There is an academic journal that is put out by OUU but publication is sporadic and in the last five years, only two editions have come out. Moreover, the journal covers everything from research on distance education, to research on particular specialised areas covering the whole

academic spectrum. Some money is available for research projects, but the allocation of this is extremely political and there is little monitoring once the monies have been given out. Access to institutional data is limited, if not impossible. For the most part lecturers have limited interaction with students at the OUU and there is little work on course development (given the lack of financing for such activities). Often staff at OUU fails to turn up for days on end.

In this context *Kabir's* desire to do research is driven more by personal concerns rather than any institutional encouragement. *Kabir* sees doing research as an opportunity to work with international colleagues, an opportunity to get published and an opportunity to travel both nationally and internationally. Moreover, it is often the only positive activity in an otherwise demoralised work environment. For the most part *Kabir* will do this research in his own time. *Kabir's* access to computers is extremely limited, and he has no access to the Internet. He is saving to buy his own computer. He has some word processing skills, and has rudimentary knowledge of *Excel*. Access to library resources are limited except through other colleagues who may have some of the distance education literature.

Abida Quuyaam

Abida Quuyaam is a researcher at Auranzeb Open University (AOU) and has been working there since she completed her degree in sociology six years ago. She is part of the Evaluation and Research Group (ERG) at the university where she works as a junior researcher at the unit. Besides herself, there is another junior researcher, a senior researcher and a director. Their mandate is everything and anything the vice-chancellor deems necessary to be investigated, from compiling statistics for different government departments, evaluations on programmes and research projects that come from abroad. *Abida's* main task is to liaise with the data management unit in order to gather statistics and compile them in simple reports. She also works on different projects when she has the opportunity. *Abida* does visit the regional centres and has experience in carrying out ready-prepared surveys. This has generated an interest in gender issues, as she has seen first-hand how ODL can benefit women.

The ERG, although very small, is extremely overworked. There is one shared computer in the unit which is based in the Director's office. Internet access is erratic as access is through a manual dial-up, on a common access number used by the whole university. Access is often complicated by the fact that electricity supply is unreliable. There is some discussion of upgrading the system to allow for better conductivity. The unit has little time to carry out well-planned research projects and has limited time to consider new methodological approaches. They work with tried and tested methods although they are all keen to learn about new approaches. *Abida*, although quite skilled in using *Excel* and working with simple percentages, has limited knowledge of statistical skills and packages she could use to improve her

analysis. Her written English language is quite poor and she has little experience in writing prose.

Abida is keen to do research for both institutional and personal reasons. She has shown keenness to work on ERG projects related to gender issues, particularly questions relating to how the institution can improve access to women. On the personal front she hopes that undertaking research will give her an opportunity to travel and publish. She has submitted one article for the AOU journal but it was not accepted because her sampling method was seen to be weak, and her prose poor. She also does not have access to some of the more recent literature in ODL. The director of ERG however is supportive of *Abida's* desire to undertake research, and offers her opportunities where possible.

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