1.0 Introduction

COL has been involved in education and development in Sri Lanka through several initiatives in three sectors: education, learning for livelihoods and human environment. This involved working in quality assurance, teacher training and development, capacity building in open and distance learning (ODL) and testing new models of community engagement with media.

In this background, the COL has been instrumental in extending its support to ODL programmes in Sri Lanka. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) appreciates very much the assistance provided by COL. The ODL activities have included a dual model system in higher education sector and working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as community-based organisations. Among them, the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), University of Colombo (UoC), National Institute of Education (NIE), University of Ruhuna (UoR), and a number of NGOs are champions in running ODL programmes extensively.

2.0 Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in Sri Lanka

2.1 Teacher education and quality assurance

The aforementioned public and private institutions and agencies are conducting a number of teacher education programmes using ODL methods. This includes development of quality assurance systems and related professional development of staff/personnel at all levels in line with ODL and technology-mediated approaches.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are also working towards expanding teacher education through combinations of ODL and classroom-focused training in Sri Lanka through increasing opportunities and capacity of developing and delivering quality professional development of teachers and other education sector personnel. As a result, ODL programmes adopted e-learning and classroom-focused training.

Further, it has developed a toolkit on ‘quality assurance for teacher education and development’. Policymakers and teacher educators share their experiences on quality assurance in teacher education at regional level and Sri Lankan experts are contributing to this. HEIs have developed and adopted ‘quality assurance guidelines’ for national assessments and accreditation according to the guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in Sri Lanka. Indeed, it has used contents given in COL’s ‘handbook
for quality assurance in higher education’. Beside, with the co-sponsoring of COL, ADB-funded Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) has produced ‘performance indicators for quality assurance in distance higher education’.

Moreover, in terms of progress of COL activities, Sri Lankan experts have contributed in the field of teacher education and quality assurance programmes in various ways. Capacity building workshop on the integration of ICT and OER into the curricula of teacher education programmes was held at the OUSL and 37 academic staff members were trained. Further, five online courses from five professional development programmes for teachers and teacher educators at OUSL were developed. Further, COL held an evaluation workshop on the integration of ICT and OER in OUSL online education courses.

2.2 Open distance learning

The OUSL conducted a number of ODL programmes and is making steady progress.

In addition, NIE implemented ‘Open School’ and is paying special attention to children who are out-of-schools and adults. Open School was initiated by the NIE for the purpose of meeting the needs of children and achieving the Education for All (EFA) targets. It appears that Sri Lanka has somewhat failed to ensure equal access to all the children to complete their formal education, although education was considered as a priority since independence. This is evident from the increase in the number of children who have dropped out of school. The dropouts could be seen as the most disadvantaged, marginalised and vulnerable groups in the society. One of the reasons for increasing dropouts is that the traditional patterns of education in Sri Lanka ignore new non-formal innovative channels such as distance and open learning. Therefore, the NIE has introduced ‘Open School’ as a low cost non-formal flexible channel to cater to learning needs of out-of-schoolchildren (OOSC), youth and adults adapting open and distance learning system. The Open School was inaugurated in 2005 and began implementing its programme in 2007.

Objectives of the Open School (NIE)

- Provide an alternative path for those who need to continue their education.
- Provide assistance to those who need to complete their secondary education.
- Provide opportunities for those who are unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled.
- Strengthen a strong link between education and the ‘world of work’.
- Ensure importance and value of continuing education for improving the quality of life.
- Promote social justice and social harmony.
- Promote a learning society.


**Target groups**

- Drop-outs and failures from formal education due to various reasons.
- Learners who do not have access to education due to social, economic and cultural situations.
- Unskilled and semi-skilled who want to continue their education.
- Disabled children and youth.
- Children in correctional centres and prisoners.
- Displaced and war-affected children and youth.
- Other disadvantaged groups.

**Programmes**

Open School courses are offered in both Sinhala and Tamil. At present the following courses are implemented:

- Foundation programme.
- Open secondary education programme.
- Open senior secondary education programme.
- Supplementary courses.
- Language courses life-enrichment courses.

**Major functions of the Department of Open School of the NIE**

- Conduct needs surveys for identification of needs.
- Design and develops courses.
- Train course writers for writing ODL material.
- Develop and produces course materials.
- Establish Regional Study Centers.
- Enroll learners and affiliate them to the Regional Study Centers.
- Recruit facilitators/tutors and train them.
- Provide learning support for learners.
- Link with national and international institutes, organisations and departments for the development of activities of the Open School.
- Conduct continuous and final evaluation.
- Provide opportunities and facilities for those who wish to do government examinations.
- Conduct monitoring and supervision programmes.
- Certification.
Organisational structure

Open School is conducted by the NIE in Colombo and is managed by a director and small staff. Material development and distribution, capacity building, monitoring and evaluation and general administration are done by the Department of Open School. Each centre is under the charge of a senior tutor. They attend sessions in the department where the following month’s programme and work plan is discussed and approved by the Director.

Present situation and current needs: Presently, more than 2,400 learners follow the Open School programmes in 40 Regional Study Centres established island-wide. There is a huge demand for ‘Open School programme’ in Eastern, Central and Sabaragamuva provinces. Therefore, the NIE will identify the needs of the Open School in such provinces and plan to establish new centres in 2015.

Further, there is an urgent need to revise and update the modules and learning materials of Open School as Sri Lankan general school curriculum is being revised. Due to popular demand for technical and vocational subjects, the introduction of a new technical stream is essential.

Capacity development of staff

- Exposure visits.
- Workshop.
- Training programmes.
- Training on latest teaching methods.

Achievement of Open School

- 400 learners sat for GCE OL examination.
- 160 learners got through the GCE OL examinations and 10 learners are following GCE AL classes.
- 175 learners joined the formal schools.
- 827 learners were able to find jobs in various fields.
- Established 25 Regional Study Centres and 57 sub centres.
- Recruited 216 tutors and 25 senior tutors.
- Conducted two international workshops and four national workshops.
- Conducted 20 surveys on the learning needs of learners.
- Prepared 73 modules, consisting of 38 Sinhala modules, 33 Tamil modules and two (2) supplementary books for English.
- Five learners got through the grade 5 scholarship examinations.
Major annual activities of Open School, 2014

1.0 Upgrading of the modules and learning materials

2.0 Capacity development of regional staff:
   - Preparing training package.
   - Training of tutors.

3.0 Providing learner support:
   - Conduct face to face sessions.
   - Mobile teaching.
   - Stationery.
   - Extracurricular activities

4.0 Monitoring and supervision:
   - Conduct progress review meetings.
   - Conduct centre supervision.

5.0 Evaluation of the programme.

6.0 Printing of modules

Moreover, in relation to school education, the GoSL is working at a significant level to increase access and participation in primary and secondary education in line with the Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (ESDFP) 2006-2011 and 2012-2016. ESDFP has planned a number of projects/activities to increase access and participation in primary and secondary education as well as strengthening non-formal and special education programmes. Particular attention has been paid on marginalised areas in the country.

Further, several Sri Lankan universities and NIE have been involved in developing/preparing learning materials especially in e-learning and media education.

2.3 Higher Education

External degree programmes in the country are being implemented by the UGC of Sri Lanka with the collaboration of COL’s technical assistance. Further, action has been taken to strengthen the higher education system especially developing models and materials for higher education through OUSL and dual-mode operations.

Further, it has conducted capacity building in higher education to provide professional development for faculty and staff in HEIs. In relation to this, a number of university
academic staff members participated and contributed at international conferences and forums.

2.4 Rural community development

Further, COL has supported the OUSL to establish a rural research unit to identify rural community needs and use technologies that are appropriate for their development and capabilities.

The University of Colombo with the assistance of COL has initiated a programme on life-long learning for farmers (L3 Farmers). This programme empowers the vulnerable rural women and their families to: gain knowledge, create their own self-directed learning process, organise themselves to solve problems, food security, improve their living conditions, and increase their freedom and independence from government support and subsidies. Following key partners are directly involved in implementation of L3 Farmer programme on a pilot basis: farmers, a consortium of learning institutions (i.e. OUSL, UoC, Eastern University, Export Development Board (EDB), and Irrigation Department), Vidhatha centres (Vidhatha Centers which are equipped with computers, internet and other ICT facilities are being established in more than 300 villages under the Ministry of Science and Technology. These centers will facilitate the transfer of information from scientific and research institutions to rural farmers), and Rural Cooperative Bank (i.e. through providing loans to farmers).

Moreover, the UoC has started an online agro-technology degree programme for rural farmers, with a pilot project already showing spectacular results. The university had started a pilot programme in the village of Weligatte in Hambantota in the deep south of the island teaching farmers tissue culture, agro-technology, farm management techniques and marketing. Indeed, a laboratory has been set up, staffed with young girls from the areas, who are now getting higher yields and revenue. These farmers’ incomes have increased tenfold and can definitely see the difference, over the past five years. Farming has to be approached in a scientific manner to increase yields, improve quality and win markets. Most Sri Lankan farmers are still using traditional methods, but a scientific grounding in farming can transform their lives. The university will first start a certificate level course leading to a diploma and eventually a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree. Each level of the programme will take one academic year. Sri Lanka’s university system can only absorb about three per cent of students who complete secondary education. The new agriculture course will use a combination of e-learning, printed materials sent through post, compact discs, face-to-face teaching and lab work. But most of the course work will be conducted through e-learning. Farmer will access e-learning modules through a network of internet communications kiosks, known as Nanasela’s, promoted by the ICTA, Sri Lanka. The programme is a part of the ADB-funded DEMP, initially funded with five million rupees. Students are expected to contribute a part of the costs, though it is subsidised.

The Department of Agricultural Economics of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna (UoR) has initiated a programme on ‘life-long learning for farmers (L3 Farmers). The UoR and Mobitel launched the mushroom cultivation capacity building programme
through mobile phones, which reached number of learners throughout the country. This programme empowers the vulnerable rural farmers and their families to: gain knowledge, create their own self-directed learning process, organise themselves to solve problems by making their products and food security, improve their living conditions, and increase their freedom and independence from government support and subsidies.

These programmes will contribute to increased productivity and greater income for the farmers.

2.5 Professional development

COL also supported counterpart universities and agencies for professional development in different disciplines in order to explore and share local, regional and international experience especially in line with the ODL programmes. COL provided assistance to OUSL to transform and implement their existing diploma/certificate programmes on ‘good governance and leadership’ into ODL format for delivery through OUSL’s regional centres.

3.0. Actions taken to improve the quality of education in Sri Lanka: Working towards establishing a knowledge hub

The Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka has taken several actions to improve the quality of education both primary and secondary. In line with the national education and economic policy of Sri Lanka, it has implemented a number of innovative and future-oriented programmes and selected initiatives are given below:

- Increase compulsory education age up to 16 years (grade 11) from age 14 (grade 9).
- Introduce new technological stream for GCE AL examination in 2013.
- Develop full-fledged 1,000 secondary schools island-wide.
- Establish a child-friendly feeder primary school networks.
- Implement national policy on early childhood and care development and standardisation of pre-school centres and teachers qualifications.
- Improve the content and quality of textbooks.
- Upgrading of primary and secondary curriculum.
- Improving national testing and evaluation systems.
- Implement programmes on social cohesion and peace education.

4.0. Way forward

In conclusion it can be said that these initiatives under the ODL programmes in Sri Lanka are contributing to improving the quality of school education and higher education as well as ensuring economic efficiency and equity of educational investment in Sri Lanka. With
these social, economic and educational experiences, the policymakers are convinced that the way forward is to strengthen existing programmes and initiate new ventures in collaboration with COL.

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