TOPIC 6

Issues in Distance Delivery

1. Overview

These materials support a general as opposed to a detailed discussion of the kinds of issues that confront personnel involved in the delivery of open and distance learning programmes.

The first subsection sets out the various models or ways of setting up an open and distance learning programme:

- single mode institution;
- a department within an existing institution;
- co-operative arrangements; and
- hybrids.

The second subsection opens with a list of similarities between open and distance education programmes and their more conventional counterparts. This list is only a beginning, and could be expanded during discussion with participants about features that are common to all education programmes, regardless of mode of development or delivery.

The remainder of the materials focus on several issues that are of particular concern to those involved in the delivery of open and distance learning programmes:

- analysing system (*systems thinking*);
- staffing;
- teamwork; and
- quality assurance.

1.1 Source materials for this topic

Bates, T. *Technology in open learning and distance education: a guide for decision-makers*. Vancouver: The Commonwealth of Learning and the Open Learning Agency, 1991.

Moore, M., and G. Kearsley. *Distance education: a systems view*. **Belmont:** Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996.

Mugridge, I. (ed.). *Distance education in single and dual mode universities*. Vancouver: The Commonwealth of Learning, 1992.

Paul, R. *Open learning and open management*. London: Kogan Page, 1990.

Perraton, H. *Administrative structures for distance education*. London: The Commonwealth Secretariat and The Commonwealth of Learning, 1991.

Snowden, B., and J. Daniel. The economics and management of small post-secondary distance education systems. *Distance Education* I:1, 1980.

2. Models of open and distance learning

An open and distance learning programme can be set up in a number of ways. At the risk of over-simplification, these alternatives can be described in terms of the following organisational arrangements.

2.1 Single mode institutions

A *single mode* institution operates with a *free-standing* structure, assuming that the institution will itself undertake most of the following functions:

- designing education programmes, including acquiring and developing teaching material;
- tutoring and counselling;
- awarding credit (in formal education programmes);
- producing, storing, and distributing learning materials;
- keeping records of learners, inventory, and finance;
- providing administration and finance;
- marketing programmes and recruiting learners; and
- evaluating programmes and processes.

The free-standing operational structures of single mode institutions

- are usually autonomous; and

- have open and distance learning as their dominant or sole function.

They can be categorised into two types.

Single purpose, single mode institutions

Some open and distance learning colleges have been set up to teach a single subject, especially for teacher training.

> *Example*: William Pitcher College in Swaziland was established to provide open and distance learning courses for the in-service training of teachers.

Multi-purpose, single mode institutions

Other open and distance learning institutions offer a variety of courses:

- open universities;

  > *Example*: Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, the Open University of Sri Lanka, and the Open University in Britain.

- open colleges, which offer courses at a number of levels; and

  > *Example*: the Open Access College as discussed in the case study in this kit, the Tanzanian National Correspondence Institute, and the National Extension College in Britain.

- open schools.

  > *Example*: the National Open School of India and the Open Access College as discussed in the case study in this kit.

Arguments for a purpose-built system that teaches only at a distance include the following:

- the administrative structures of conventional educational systems are not the most suitable ones for developing and managing open and distance learning systems;
- conventional institutions may regard open and distance learning as a poor relation and consequently be reluctant to allocate it adequate resources;
- the requirements of distance learners are likely to be better served if the institution is wholly dedicated to their needs;
- the characteristics of the target audience are significantly different from those of campus based learners (for example, adults have distinctive approaches to learning compared with young people at the tertiary stage of learning);
- the pedagogy of open and distance learning is different than that of conventional systems; and
- significant innovation is more likely to occur outside the framework of traditional educational institutions.

Example: These distinctions were true of the early days of the open universities of the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

Discussion: Feel free to disagree with these arguments, or to add to them.

2.2 A department within an existing teaching institution

Many universities or colleges decide to set up a distance learning department that works alongside other departments, specialising in open and distance learning but within an otherwise conventional institution.

Arguments for such *bimodal* or *dual mode* institutions include the following:

- the structured learning materials prepared by course teams provide consistent quality of instruction to both off-campus and on-campus learners;
- self-instructional materials encourage learning through activities and independent learning;
- learners are liberated from the constraints of the traditional lecture and tutorial system, and can move from one mode to another according to their needs;
- learners benefit from the esteem that comes from a conventional university and demonstrated parity of standards; and
- staff are freed to teach in more interactive ways.

Bimodal structures can take two forms.

Subject-oriented departments

Subject-oriented departments teach externally in their own discipline.

Example: At the University of the South Pacific the Department of Education launched the first open and distance learning programmes for teacher education before the university began to teach at a distance in other subjects.

Distance education departments

Distance education departments take the main responsibility for planning and running open and distance learning within a bimodal institution.

Examples: The Distance Education Unit of the University of Botswana, and a number of 'institutes', such as the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education of the University of Guyana, the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education at the University of Papua New Guinea, and the Open Learning Institute of Charles Sturt University, as discussed in the case studies in this kit.

Variants within this structure include:

- distance education departments that are purely administrative with no teaching functions

Example: The University of Zambia can require staff to teach both face to face and at a distance but the specialist department only co-ordinates and distributes materials;

- specialist open and distance learning departments that have a pedagogical function

  Example: Murdoch University had at one time a specialist department that did not employ its own subject specialists but had staff with educational skills in open and distance learning who played a role in the development and use of materials that went beyond the purely administrative; and

- external teaching departments with their own subject-specialist staff concerned solely with external learners

  Example: The University of Wisconsin Extension has a staff of well over 1000 and a full range of academic departments but exists in parallel with the University of Wisconsin.

2.3 Co-operative arrangements

In a co-operative arrangement for open and distance learning, institutions work together to teach and support learners and distribute the various functions between them.

A distinction can be drawn between two types of co-operative arrangements.

National co-operative structures

- The functions of preparing materials, giving tutorial support to learners, and awarding credit may be carried out by different partners.

  Examples: The Chinese Television University produces materials that are used by a federation of universities who provide tutorial support to back the centrally produced courses.

  The National Extension College in the United Kingdom produces 'flexi-study' packs of learning materials, which colleges can purchase for their own use, with advice from the NEC on running open and distance learning programmes.

  The University of Lincolnshire and Humberside have franchised their courses to other universities.

  The Open Learning Foundation is a consortium of tertiary level institutions in the United Kingdom which produces course material packs that are available at a discount to member institutions and at full-price to non-member institutions.

- Co-operative arrangements need not be permanent or all-purpose.

Example: In Australia three universities co-operated on the development and running of a degree-level course in women's studies, in a situation in which it would have been difficult for any one of them to offer the course on its own, and in which the universities were not working together on their whole range of programmes.

International co-operative structures

- Co-operation is also possible across national frontiers.

  Example: Commonwealth Heads of Government agreed in 1987 to set up The Commonwealth of Learning in order to promote co-operation in open and distance learning within the Commonwealth and to facilitate the sharing of resources among Commonwealth colleges and universities.

- Several other institutions have been established to promote international co-operation in open and distance learning.

  Examples: CIFFAD, the *Consortium international francophone de formation a distance*, set up with support from Canada and France with broadly comparable objectives to those of The Commonwealth of Learning;

  CREAD, the *Consorcio-red educacion a distancia*, which links open and distance learning organisations throughout the Western Hemisphere; and

  EADTU, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, working on the sharing and joint development of teaching material.

To date, these organisations are not enrolling learners directly but are providing services to support the work of national institutions.

2.4 Hybrids

The operational structures outlined above are somewhat arbitrary, and there are both possible and actual hybrids among them. For example, in several cases an institution has broader functions than this account of structures might suggest.

Examples: The Indira Gandhi National Open University serves both as an autonomous institution and a co-operative body in that it has co-ordinating and funding responsibilities for the other Indian open universities.

The Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre and the Tanzania National Correspondence Institute are multi-purpose institutions but their teacher education programmes work within a co-operative

framework that might be labelled a 'national co-operative' structure.

In addition, an open and distance learning programme may be mounted by an organisation that is quasi-autonomous and free-standing in some ways but not in others because it is one component of a multi-campus, state-wide, or nation-wide institution.

Examples: The Open University of the Philippines is one of six universities that comprise the University of the Philippines as discussed in the case study in this kit.

The Tele-université of Québec is one institution among several that comprise the Université de Québec.

Empire State College in New York is part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system.

Yet another variant is the open and distance learning programme that is not yet institutionalised but is rather organised as a project, usually under the auspices of a government ministry, which may or may not eventually become an established component of the overall provision of education overseen by that ministry.

Examples: Several upgrading schemes for primary teachers are operating under the auspices of ministries of education, as projects funded by donor agencies, and not yet formally institutionalised. Examples include the Northern Integrated Teacher Education Project (NITEP) in Uganda and the Strengthening of Primary Education (SPRED) projects in Kenya, which both offer upgrading schemes for primary teachers.

Athabasca University in Canada operated as a project of the government of the province of Alberta for a number of years before being chartered as the province's fourth university.

Discussion: Are there open and distance learning arrangements in your own and your participants' experience that do not easily fit in any of these categories?

3. Issues in managing open and distance learning programmes

Managers of open and distance learning programmes face the same challenges as the managers of learning programmes delivered in more conventional, face-to-face settings:

- both aim to provide an education that is relevant and of high quality;
- both aim to offer and achieve certain minimum standards of education and training;
- both have administrative systems that enrol learners and register them on their chosen courses; and

- in the case of conventional programmes, both usually require learners to sit examinations before receiving certification.

However, open and distance learning programmes and conventional programmes have several differences. Specifically, open and distance learning programmes:

- often tend to be 'open' programmes, concerned with improving access and with democratising education, as contrasted with maintaining education as a privilege of the elite;
- drop or lower the academic entrance requirements that conventional programmes typically require if they are also open programmes;
- have the same exit or graduation requirements as conventional programmes even though, because of their openness, they may accept learners with fewer formal qualifications, which creates a situation that places even greater demands on those providing tuition and learner support;
- tend to deliver their courses using a mix of technologies and media; they almost always include some print materials, but these are supported by a variety of electronic media, including radio, television, audio and video cassettes, computers, and telecommunications;
- are typically supported by part-time tutors and counsellors who may be employed by conventional institutions;
- frequently require collaboration with other programmes and agencies to provide learning materials, course development and delivery personnel, facilities, or all of these;
- tend to need larger administrative bodies that accommodate a greater diversity of functions; and
- must remain open, flexible, and innovative in response to learner needs, a challenge that is best met by open, flexible, and innovative approaches to management.

> *Discussion*: You will likely want to add other similarities and differences to this list. You might also involve your participants in generating a list of the characteristics that are common to educational programmes in general, and then use that list as a basis for differentiating distance programmes from conventional programmes.

These differences between open and distance learning and more conventional programmes raise a number of issues for managers of open and distance learning programmes:

- analysing systems (*systems thinking*);
- staffing;
- teamwork; and
- quality assurance.

Discussion: This list is intended only as a prompt for discussion. You are welcome and urged to add other management issues.

3.1 Systems thinking

In Topic 1 (Introduction to Open and Distance Learning) of this kit, participants were introduced to the systems approach that characterises open and distance learning provision. A systems approach sets the conditions for proceeding with problem solving in an orderly way, recognising that every component and task is related to every other, and that a change in one component will bring about changes in the others. In Topic 1 these components were described as a series of phases:

analysis ® design ® development ® implementation ® evaluation ® revision

Managing these tasks is clearly not linear, for the following reasons:

- Programme staff will be involved in several of these tasks at the same time.
- The tasks are interdependent.

> *Example*: Decisions about the type of media to be used will depend partly on costs and partly on instructional appropriateness. Decisions about assessment will have to be made concurrently with materials design and development. Doing the revisions that fall out from the evaluation will involve reworking many or all of these tasks.

For this reason it can be useful to look at these phases as constituting a *management cycle*. The notion of a *management cycle* is based on the following principles:

- that open and distance learning depend equally on co-ordinated academic, administrative, technological, and learner support activities and services;
- that these services must be jointly managed through team management;
- that their effectiveness requires elaborate planning and pre-planning in order to ensure adequate early warning mechanisms;
- that it is possible to produce standardised guidelines and structures as tools to assist this process; and
- that effective communication and data exchange networks are essential for such management.

The discussion that follows collapses into four phases the six phases that were discussed in Topic 1 (Introduction to Open and Distance Learning).

Pre-planning

A new programme or course emerges from within an academic unit or collaboratively from an idea or need identified from an outside agency, such as a government department. This new course idea must then be subjected to scrutiny in comparison with the institution's overall mission, its assessment of its resources according to its strategic plan, and a needs

assessment study, taking into account the outside environment into which it will be launched. Only if it still seems feasible in the light of these considerations should the programme or course go ahead.

Planning and development

Two steps must be taken at the planning and development stage. The first step is a detailed preparation of the curriculum and strategy for the programme, which involves a good deal of consultation, between the academic unit and the service departments such as media, printing, and learner support, to explore the technical possibilities and the implications of the curriculum intentions. This step will result in

- a detailed curriculum for the programme;
- a media, print, and tutorial delivery plan; and
- a detailed budget estimate of both expected costs and income from student fees or other sources.

All of this information will be put together into a *development blueprint*, which will be circulated through the appropriate approval processes of the institution.

Once approval has been gained, the second step is to design and develop the materials. This activity is probably the most complex and expensive in the whole cycle. The curriculum must be turned into reality, involving the following stages:

- writers must be identified, recruited, trained, and supported;
- course teams, including editors, instructional designers, and media producers, must be created and sustained;
- schedules must be drawn up and agreed upon;
- the materials must be pre-tested and revised;
- the whole package must be moderated by peer academics to ensure recognised standards are met; and
- the promotional plan must be worked out and put into action.

Tools to assist in these processes include standard contract forms, and instructional design and house style manuals.

When all these tasks have been accomplished, it is necessary for senior management to make a final review to ensure that the original decision to go ahead is still justified several months later.

Production and preparation

After the final go-ahead, the materials need to be reproduced to meet the latest estimate of enrolments, both print and audio-visual. If audio-visuals are to be broadcast, they must be produced in their final form and broadcast schedules must be publicised. Parallel with the reproduction process, the distribution logistics need to be finalised and full tutorial and learner support services put in place. This will include the training of tutors and facilitators.

Delivery and evaluation

It is only at the delivery and evaluation stage that the courses are ready to be presented to learners. It is now that the tutorial and learner support services become the main players in the process. The role of academic and media developers, however, is not over. The programme must be continuously monitored, especially during its first presentation, to identify problems and possible improvements as well as to assess student progress and success. Initial monitoring may well lead to revision before future presentations. Fuller evaluation will be necessary at a later stage to guide decisions by senior management as to whether the programme should go to scale as a long-term programme or whether and when it should be withdrawn.

> *Discussion*: A useful exercise at this point is to have participants map the planning and management cycle as it applies to their own context, indicating the units and individuals within their organisation that are involved in each phase and the ways in which they are interrelated.
>
> In addition, suggest to participants that they read the two case studies included in this kit which discuss in some detail the importance of planning for providers of open and distance learning: the case studies from the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education at the University of Papua New Guinea and the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside.

3.2 Staffing

The staffing mix

The staffing mix required to implement an open and distance learning programme depends on the educational job to be done and the organisational model that has been chosen. To take an extreme example, compare the staffing needs of two completely different open and distance learning programmes.

> *Example*: A non-formal programme of literacy work with adult villagers, supported by radio and regular study circles, will require considerably different personnel than an executive MBA programme of formal study offered by a single mode, distance teaching university.

Nonetheless, personnel will likely fall into the following categories.

Educational staff

Educational staff include:

- subject specialists;
- specialists in the production of materials;
- specialists on tutoring and counselling;
- tutors, especially part-time tutors;
- broadcasting producers; and

- research workers and evaluators.

Example: Both of the open and distance learning programmes in the example require educational staff set out in the following table.

Staffing Needs of Two Different Open and Distance Learning Programmes

Type of staff	**Literacy circle**	**MBA programme**
subject specialist	in the teaching of reading	in management accounting
specialists in the production of materials	in producing effective flannelgraph cut-outs and literacy primers	in producing study guides in management accounting
specialists in tutoring and counselling	trainers of study circle facilitators	career advisors
tutors, especially part-time tutors	study circle facilitators	tutors communicating with learners via computer conferencing
broadcasting producers	radio programme producers	video producers for marketing the executive MBA programme and recruiting volunteers

Materials production staff

Materials production staff include:

- printers;
- copy editors;
- graphic designers;
- broadcasting technicians;

- typists and word processing clerks; and
- desktop publishing specialists.

Administrative staff

Administrative staff include:

- administrators;
- managers;
- personnel staff;
- financial staff;
- records clerks;
- secretaries;
- typists;
- warehousing and dispatch staff; and
- messengers, janitors, drivers.

Training staff

Arrangements will also be necessary for the training of staff, which may be done

- on the job;
- through short courses at the institution;
- by sending learners on full-time or part-time courses; or
- by enrolling them in an appropriate course taught at a distance.

The choice of organisational model will influence the training strategy.

> *Example*: Within a bimodal institution, where a course writer is combining that role with teaching courses face-to-face, sensitivity is needed in arranging courses for experienced university course writers on how to write learning materials for use at a distance.
>
> Within a single mode institution, which contracts course writers from other, conventional institutions, the same kinds of sensitivity will be required in training, as well as even greater flexibility in timing the training sessions so that they fit in with the writers' other commitments.

Discussion: The intent here is to emphasise the similarities and differences in the configuration of 'teaching staff' between conventional and distance programmes.

Seek examples from both your own and your participants' experience.

Monitoring and supporting staff at a distance

The management of open and distance learning programmes will almost always involve managers in the monitoring and support of staff who are at a distance from central office. These staff may include regional centre staff, tutors, and learning materials producers, including writers of print materials and scripts for media production.

It has become somewhat of a truism in open and distance learning that learners need continuing contact with the programme and support from programme personnel as they undertake and work through their studies. Staff at a distance need the same kind of support and contact, especially since they are frequently working under conditions such as the following:

- they tend to be part-time, with major affiliation and commitment to some other institution;
- they tend to be on short-term or annual contracts;
- they likely have no regular face-to-face contact with supervisors and colleagues;
- their roles are frequently diffuse and ill-defined; and
- too often the adage, 'Out of sight, out of mind', means not just isolation but invisibility for distant staff when it comes to decisions on policies and procedures, which tend to be made without due attention to their particular circumstances and needs.

Because of the distance factor, it is even more important with distant staff to practice effective staff relations, by means of:

- clear role descriptions, expectations, and reporting lines;
- clearly defined jurisdictions and responsibilities;
- clear policy directives;
- continual updating on changes in policies and procedures;
- a thorough induction into the programme, its history, goals, policies, and procedures;
- training in the wide variety of skills and knowledge that regional staff will need in order to provide front-line service to learners;
- frequent and effective two-way communication (e-mail is an excellent medium for this where available);
- opportunities for face-to-face meetings;
- frequent performance review and monitoring;
- accurate and efficient records systems;
- opportunities for input into decisions that affect their work;
- allowing regional staff some leeway in decision making, so staff can respond to local needs; and
- engendering a positive attitude in regional staff toward criticisms and complaints from learners, and in central staff toward complaints from the regions.

3.3 Teamwork

Managing project teams

Much of the work of open and distance learning is carried out in teams.

> *Example*: The development and production of a course requires the collaboration of subject matter experts, instructional designers, editors, visual designers, and a variety of support people, including liaison librarians, printers, and so on.
>
> Likewise, the delivery of a course requires the collaboration of tutors, counsellors, librarians, registry personnel, and course materials warehousing and dispatch clerks, among others.

Managing a team places different kinds of demands on managers than does line management:

- time, because you have specified start and finish dates;
- resources, because you need a high degree of financial accountability as projects are more difficult to cost and control than are routine line management functions; and
- personnel, because you tend to work with a cross-functional team of temporary members, some of whom will be in a reporting line to someone other than you.

Effective teamwork depends on a number of variables.

Time

A good deal of time is required to establish and re-establish the common ground that is essential to effective teamwork, which is achieved through shared experience, reflection, and discussion.

Experience and maturity

Experience in team-building among at least some of the team members is a great asset, as is a mature approach to the challenges of interpersonal communication.

Knowledge

Team members ideally should possess knowledge and expertise in a variety of fields that complement and reinforce each other rather than conflict, and that when taken together yield a much more complete and rounded picture than one field alone could produce.

Skills

Each team member needs to have skills he or she can put to direct use in making the team effective. Communication skills in particular include:

- explaining;
- describing;
- categorising;
- articulating;
- listening;

- checking out assumptions;
- attending to feelings;
- facilitating discussion; and
- demonstrating.

A sense of humour is also a valuable asset.

Shared respect

Each team member ideally should respect and admire the competence of the other members and the knowledge and skills of their respective fields or subfields. This respect extends to an eagerness to learn about the others' fields and to use all contributions.

Openness and flexibility

Vital to teamwork, openness and flexibility have several facets:

- making and accepting offers; saying 'yes, and' more often than 'yes, but' or 'no';
- accepting and even welcoming differences and recognising that diversity is strength;
- demonstrating tolerance, raising biases to conscious levels, controlling them, and expressing tolerance out loud;
- sharing rather than trading ideas, experiences, and skills;
- building on each others' learning and ideas to develop something new; and
- being willing to take risks, make errors, and learn from them as natural and useful parts of teamwork.

Desire to learn, curiosity

This variable stretches all the way from simple curiosity about how others might need to adapt our ideas in order to use them to viewing differences as exciting.

Commitment to process

All team members are concerned with efficiency and getting the job done and all get frustrated by the time taken up in meetings. Nonetheless, process is part of the task, and coming to grudging agreements rather than griping ones is vital.

Support and encouragement

Teamwork is exciting and difficult, and support and encouragement are needed in good times and bad, and should be expressed out loud and often.

Sensitivity

Sensitivity emerges in two ways: putting others' needs before one's own, at least some of the time, and paying attention to the emotional content of looks, words, and silences as well as to their intellectual substance.

Trust

Trust emerges as the keystone of teamwork. Without it teams fall apart. Risk is the flip side of trust, and must be accepted as part of the bargain.

Attention to the use of power

No matter how right or good our ideas are, telling others what to do is not the approach of a successful team, or between the team and others with whom the team interacts.

Determination and energy

Determination shines through in resistance to fatigue (headache, what headache?), in the insistence on recapturing focus when group discussion wanders too far off track, and in the continual juggling of tasks and time and other commitments in order to accommodate the needs of the group.

> *Discussion*: Ask participants for examples from their experience of teams that worked and of teams that did not work.

Networking

Creating, expanding, and maintaining relationships with other agencies — popularly known as *networking* — is an important part of the manager's job in an open and distance learning context. As was discussed in Issues in Open and Distance Learning, Topic 2 of this kit, collaboration among educational institutions, agencies, and programmes is becoming increasingly the order of the day, both in industrialised and less affluent countries, for a number of reasons, among them:

- public funding for education at all levels is decreasing, and governments are requiring institutions to work with each other and in many cases with industry in order to qualify for funding; and
- institutions and agencies are responding to decreasing levels of funding by seeking collaborative arrangements that can make scarce resources go further.

Open and distance learning programmes are far from the only ones affected by these pressures. Nonetheless, open and distance learning programmes are among the foremost seekers and implementers of collaborative arrangements, because of the nature of their work and for various other reasons:

- Learning materials development represents a major cost to distance programmes. Producers of such materials can share costs through co-development arrangements, or recoup costs by sales and leases of materials. Low-resource programmes can save on staffing and other recurrent costs by purchasing materials rather than developing their own.
- Learners are seeking flexibility, especially the ability to apply credits taken in one programme to the completion of requirements for another. Credit transfer arrangements place great demands on institutional collaborative arrangements.
- The technologies used in delivering distance programmes are forcing collaboration, partly because delivery agencies need to share costs, and partly because of the nature of the technologies themselves, which increasingly make distinctions between 'distance' and 'conventional' programmes irrelevant and meaningless.

Examples: Collaborative arrangements in open and distance learning are many and varied. Here are only a few examples.

A number of international organisations have been created to foster course sharing and other kinds of collaboration among their members, including The Commonwealth of Learning, CIFFAD (*Consortium d'institutions francophones de formation a distance*), and the *Consorcio-red de educacion a distancia*.

The Open Learning Agency in British Columbia, Canada, collaborates in course sharing arrangements with a number of institutions, including Laurentian University and Athabasca University in Canada and the Open Learning Institute in Hong Kong.

Some postgraduate degrees in open and distance learning have been the results of collaboration, for example between Deakin University and the University of South Australia, and between the University of London Institute of Education, the International Extension College, Deakin University, and the Open Learning Agency.

The Contact North network in northern Ontario, Canada, makes delivery facilities available for a number of institutions to offer secondary and tertiary level programmes to widely scattered populations.

For managers of open and distance learning programmes, this increasing collaboration means a need for the following kinds of skills and knowledge:

- a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to differences in institutional cultures;
- skills in building effective trust relationships; and
- the ability to define, perceive, and monitor mutual benefits in collaborative arrangements.

In many ways these are skills similar to the skills team members need. Thus managers of open and distance learning programmes need skills not only in managing teams but also in being part of them on a wider scale.

Ross Paul in his book, *Open Learning and Open Management* (1990) gives the following advice to programme managers who are involved in collaborative projects:

- ensure that clear benefits from the collaboration are established and understood by all partners;
- ensure that clear and specific objectives and measures of achievement are stated;
- remain open to re-negotiation if necessary;
- keep the number of partners involved to the fewest possible to make the collaborative venture successful;
- delegate clear authority and responsibility to specific partners and individuals;

- take seriously the need to understand differences in corporate cultures;
- scrutinise the collaborative venture on a regular basis and disband if it is no longer meeting its objectives; and
- ensure that agreements have the full support of the executive officers of all the partner institutions.

3.4 Quality assurance

Quality assurance as a management system

Quality assurance is an approach to organising work that ensures that:

- the institution's mission and aims are clear and known to all;
- the systems through which work will be done are well thought out, foolproof, and communicated to everyone;
- it is clear to everyone who is responsible for what;
- what the institution regards as 'quality' is well defined and documented;
- systems are in place to check that everything is working to plan; and
- when things go wrong — and they will — there are agreed ways of putting them right.

The quality assurance approach to management has three essential features:

- a method of checking up on how well the system is being adhered to;
- a method of correcting mistakes; and
- a method of changing the system if it has become out of date.

Quality assurance starts with a clear statement of what the institution exists to achieve or, in other words, its mission. For example, the mission might be:

- to be the best provider of open and distance learning in the region or country;
- to provide access and courses to the most disadvantaged learners; or
- to achieve excellence in research in open and distance learning.

Once the mission statement is agreed, the quality assurance system compels the institution to agree the methods by which things are to be done.

A key part of setting up a quality system is defining a quality policy. This policy document has to be in a form that all staff can use and understand. It might cover:

- who is responsible for setting up and running the quality assurance system;
- how management is to monitor and review the system;
- which functions or tasks will have written, defined procedures;
- how the implementation of these procedures will be monitored; and
- how failure to adhere to the procedures will be corrected.

Evaluating programme performance

The three steps of evaluating can be labelled

- measuring;
- comparing; and
- correcting.

Each presents special problems in an open and distance learning programme.

Measuring

Measuring the learning activity of learners is complicated by distance.

Even determining such apparently straightforward indicators as rates of learner progress or drop-out is surprisingly difficult to do on a continuous basis, especially in programmes that enrol learners throughout the year.

Only in the vital areas of academic quality is measurement in a distance programme easier than in a conventional programme, for the team approach to course development and services delivery both encourages quality and ensures a wide awareness of any shortcomings.

It is rather ironic that, although the team approach gives distance courses more quality — and usually quantity — than their conventional counterparts, the notion that distance study is substandard dies hard in traditional circles.

Comparing

Comparing the performance of distance programmes with conventional programmes is also problematic.

In the area of economic performance, standards borrowed from conventional education should be used with caution.

> *Example*: Capital-to-operating cost ratios tend to be considerably higher for conventional programmes than for distance programmes (except in cases in which a distance programme has had to make a major investment in technological infrastructure).

In the area of learner performance, especially in terms of retention and graduation rates, comparing distance learners with conventional learners may be difficult given probable differences in entry qualifications and circumstances of study. Even comparing one distance programme with another is difficult, since different programmes tend to adopt different definitions of who counts as a 'learner'.

> *Example*: Some programmes count as learners all those who have enrolled in a course, whereas others limit the use of the term to those who actually sit the exam, and discount the fact that only a small percentage of those initially registered have actually stayed with the course long enough to write the exam.

Correcting

Because the standards of conventional programmes may often not be appropriate to open and distance learning programmes, the proper response to a gap between the measure and the standard may be to revise the standard rather than to initiate corrective action.

If corrective action is required, however, the highly integrated and complex nature of an open and distance learning programme may make implementation somewhat problematic.

In addition, although open and distance learning programmes tend — and need — to be flexible so that they can respond effectively to learners' needs and circumstances, this flexibility should not be abused. Staff and learners do not appreciate being part of a continuing experiment in which all the variables are undergoing constant modification.

Finally, the cost implications of corrective action may be more far-reaching in an integrated system of the kind that tends to characterise open and distance learning programmes.

> *Example*: The introduction of a new technology for delivering the teaching component of the programme, even if it is confined to one course in the programme, will have consequences for all aspects of the programme, from recruiting and marketing to staffing and training to developing, producing, and dispatching materials.

4. Practice exercise

4.1 Putting management issues in context

Instructions: Divide the group into a number of small working groups, four if possible.

Assign to each group one of the issues discussed in this section:

- analysing systems (systems thinking);
- staffing;
- teamwork; and
- quality assurance.

Ask each group to discuss and document the following three things:

- examples of the ways in which this set of issues emerges in the programmes in which the group members are involved;
- the ways in which their programmes are dealing with these issues; and
- the level of satisfaction with these responses, and the kinds of problems for which solutions are still being sought.

Ask each group to present their findings to the larger group, for discussion.

Timeframe: Approximately one-and-a-half hours, one half hour for small group discussions, ten minutes for each group report, and twenty minutes for general group discussion.

Materials required: Flipchart paper or overhead transparencies for the reports back to the plenary group.