Maximizing the Human Resource Base in Distance Education in Small States: Guyana and the Guyana In-Service Distance Education Project (GUIDE)

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Abstract

Staff of the Guyana In-Service Distance Education Project (GUIDE) and associated personnel have benefited from a range of on-the-job skills development opportunities. These were consciously built into project support and management as a subsidiary aim of strengthening the capacity of Guyana to deliver distance education programmes to help address its educational and developmental challenges.

Introduction and Background

GUIDE was first established in 1995 by agreement and financial arrangement between the Guyana Ministry of Education (MoE) and the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA), now the Department for International Development (DFID).

GUIDE's remit is to provide inservice training to untrained teachers. It does this using a mixture of distance and face-to-face education. It has developed materials largely by adaptation of those available in the Caribbean and elsewhere. These materials, together with the support system, aim to bring teachers up to teacher training college entry level by providing modules on English, Mathematics, Science, Education and Social Studies. Teachers sit the end of course examinations having studied for a period of between 18 months and two years. These examinations are recognized as qualifying successful students for entry to the national teacher training college, Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE), and are equivalent in these terms to CXC.

ODA's role in the first three-year phase of the project was to assist with the development and establishment of the course, including its administration and tutorial systems and the identification and procurement of suitable curriculum and study materials. ODA provided a resident expatriate technical cooperation officer (TCO) for this phase. The TCO worked alongside the national project staff, and in this phase the major human resource development input took the form of on-the-job counterparting of Guyanese colleagues recruited to work on the project. Additionally during the first phase, skills development workshops were held for tutors and course writers using a visiting trainer on consultancy from the International Extension College (IEC). During a one-year extension of the initial phase of ODA support, following the departure of the TCO, a six month resident adviser consultancy continued the counterparting role, though with more emphasis on planning than on capacity development.

In recent years DFID has provided financing for the technical inputs to the project and in June

1998 it engaged the IEC to manage and make the inputs for a second, two year project phase. To provide these inputs IEC undertook activities that amount to capacity building of GUIDE and to development of the human resources of the GUIDE staff and their part-time colleagues.

In contrast to the earlier ODA/DFID support, the support by IEC was designed to be delivered from a distance with intermittent visits by a range of specialist counterparts and consultants from the UK institution to assist with the development of GUIDE staff capacity in specifically targeted areas. These inputs were set in the context of a continuing background level of support through which GUIDE and IEC discussed issues and developed staff training programmes as needs were identified.

The IEC is a small specialist non-profit organization which works to promote development and improvement in the quality of life in less-developed countries through the expansion of educational opportunities. IEC provides training, consultancy, information and technical support in the design, development and delivery of distance education programmes.

IEC first became involved in the GUIDE project in 1995 when called upon to provide a series of training inputs as part of the first phase of the project. IEC's occasional involvement continued throughout but came to be a major role only with the start of the managing consultancy contract in 1998.

Human Resource Development (HRD)

Human resource development took the form of a variety of activities aimed at providing a number of differing opportunities and experiences:

- Workshops were delivered in country, each

designed to provide specialist training to GUIDE staff and its commissioned writers, editors, reviewers and researchers.

- Study tours were conducted within the region, offering participants the chance to see a similar programme to GUIDE in operation in Belize and the opportunity to share experiences with those providing this programme and to participate in regional distance education conferences.

- Short-term technical inputs were provided by specialists in materials development, record keeping, financial administration, research and learning resource centres.

- Collaboration with local institutions and projects was facilitated.

- Participatory research methodology was encouraged.

- Professional training of staff was made available and there is now a group of ten studying on the University of London's postgraduate degrees in Distance Education taught at a distance.

Management of the Human Resource Development

IEC's agreement with DFID was to manage DFID's project inputs from the UK. To facilitate this IEC developed a number of strategies:

- UK-based counterpart support to activities

- Short-term visits by IEC staff to Guyana

- Use of available technology

- Involvement of GUIDE staff as coordinators of specific areas of project activity, each one with a counterpart function providing ongoing support (research; database and records; finance and administration; materials development; learner support services;

learning resource centres; materials procurement)

- Exploiting incountry expertise

The application of this may best be illustrated by the model adopted to facilitate the development of research expertise within GUIDE.

The HRD Model in GUIDE's Research Activity

The HRD dimension of the GUIDE research is intrinsic to the participatory character of the research process. The research process started by agreeing among Guyanese stakeholders what it would be most useful and feasible to find out. It proceeded to use Guyanese personnel resources to direct and implement the research (including planning, designing, conducting the data gathering, interpretation and reporting). It concluded with disseminating and discussing the outcomes of the studies among the stakeholders and drawing up action plans based on the key findings and on stakeholders' reactions to them.

The basis of the model was that research would be carried out by the practitioners and stakeholders, and supported by technical assistance from within and outside Guyana. Centred in and coordinated by the GUIDE unit, the research studies involved people from educational institutions, ranging from the Ministry of Education (from where, for example, the chief planning officer convened one of the research teams), through the University of Guyana and the national Cyril Potter College of Education (from where many of the core research team members were recruited), to hinterland schools (where data collection and interpretation was conducted by selected local teachers).

Each of four studies was identified, designed, conducted and reported within Guyana, bringing together the researchers with counterparts from IEC at key stages in the process. For each of the studies (a hinterland study; a costs study; a review of options for the institutional future of distance education in the country; and a baseline data study), a team was established with a convenor incountry, and a counterpart was linked to the team from IEC, according to the specific area involved.

Those involved in the research process thus included GUIDE unit staff, others in the Guyanese education sector, and the many categories of people consulted for their views or for information. Each of these groups developed a greater awareness of the issues under discussion, and in particular the core research team members, both from within and outside GUIDE's staff compliment, gained experience in conducting action research. In instances where those involved were themselves experienced in research or had other skills, they shared this expertise with their research colleagues in the relevant team.

The counterparts from IEC supported the research teams by liaison from the UK (through e-mail, fax, telephone and courier) and through visits, which included in some cases specific skills development, such as designing, using and maintaining a database, and in others contributing to workshops, advising on conceptualizing, conducting and reporting the research, assisting with the drafting of terms of reference for component tasks and with other functions.

A key feature of the model adopted was a research team structure which included a convenor for each team, support from the GUIDE unit, the IEC counterpart already mentioned and, perhaps most significantly, an incountry research mentor to provide professional support to the four teams. This latter role, for which a leading Guyanese educational researcher with an international

reputation was recruited, was in due course strengthened to become research manager – a more interventionist role, to help the process and particularly its reporting reach its culmination in the latter phases of the undertaking.

Supporting the research at one step removed, as key interested parties not directly involved in its execution, were the DFID education field manager (EFM), the GUIDE Project Steering Committee (including the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Education and the chief education officer, among other significant positions), the director of GUIDE, and IEC. As a by-product of this involvement, there was reciprocal enrichment of ideas and awareness of agendas among the parties involved.

Technology was used in such ways as were appropriate through the research process. There was (as might be expected) heavy reliance on e-mail for communication between the UK counterparts in IEC and the research teams (generally, but not always, through the GUIDE unit). Relevant staff were trained in and used a database suitable for the level of equipment and expertise available and for the task in hand. Data collection and processing methods were kept consistent with what was useable in the Guyanese context (hinterland and metropolitan).

How the HRD Aspect of the Research Activity Worked in Practice

Features of the HRD dimension of the research activity as it was actually carried out which may be noted include:

- Database training carried out in Guyana and the UK

- An interim seminar where teams gained valuable experience in preparing and presenting their draft findings

- Counterpart and visiting expert guidance and feedback in financial analysis of distance education

- Inclusion in research teams of individuals not formerly involved in research or evaluation

- Adherence to the policy of interpretation and reporting of data by the research teams engaged in gathering the information, under the guidance of the team convenors and incountry research mentor/manager

- A final presentation seminar, following up from the interim presentations, which enabled research team members to join with stakeholders, including senior education sector personnel, in formulating action plans in response to these findings.

Benefits and Impact Inside GUIDE

In HRD terms (as distinct from the achievement and exploitation of the prime informational research aims), the research process made a significant contribution to the development of the skills and competence of the GUIDE staff. Component roles fulfilled by GUIDE staff which were beneficial in this respect (if at times demanding) included ones such as designing, refining and querying research instruments, processes and data; developing and manipulating a computer database; collating, analysing and interpreting cost data; preparing and presenting findings in seminar and conference settings; liaising with and coordinating teams of researchers from a wide range of institutions and backgrounds; and, overall, using an action-research approach to improve practice.

These gains for GUIDE staff are seen as part of their professional development and should be useful to them in their future work within and beyond GUIDE.

Benefits and Impact at the Wider Level

Others outside the GUIDE staff involved in the research have benefited in ways similar to those noted above. Additionally, it is hoped that a wider impact will be felt in the form of an increased readiness, desire and capacity in the education sector to incorporate action research into planning and implementation of projects and to evaluate the programmes and activities of institutions. Most especially, it is hoped that the experience of the GUIDE research projects will give confidence to those involved in the research and to those who see its outputs that there exists a resource of expertise in Guyana which can usefully and satisfactorily set up and carry out such research, and maintain ownership of the agendas, the processes and the outcomes.

The Project as a Catalyst

From the preceding example it is clear that the capacity building of GUIDE is having effects outside GUIDE itself. It is worth expanding here on some of the outcomes as they are several and varied and they illustrate how a project focused within one part of the education sector can serve as a catalyst and support for broader developments.

- An advisory committee has been formed. This advisory committee brings together institutions from across the education sector to develop a coherent national strategy for distance education. In its early, formative stages, it met to review the terms of reference of prospective visiting consultancies to GUIDE and to agree on how these technical inputs could best be put to use in informing the broader interests of the sector. Such an example was a GUIDE consultancy to help develop plans for learning resource centres; another example was related to the definition and subsequent dissemination of research studies carried out under GUIDE.

- Collaboration among institutions, the MoE and other projects in Guyana is bearing fruit. In September 1999 Guyana hosted a distance education conference with the theme 'Promoting Quality, Pragmatism and Partnership in Distance Education Delivery', which brought together distance education practitioners from around the world and particularly from around the region. The conference was planned and coordinated by a committee whose members came from collaborating organizations in Guyana. This present conference in Jamaica is in fact a follow up to that Guyana conference. Information sharing through the development and use of the project's database, as described below, illustrates another example of the collaboration and cross-fertilization engendered by GUIDE.

- Professional development, not only of GUIDE staff but also of staff from other projects and institutions, is taking place. These include CPCE, the National Centre for Education Resource Development (NCERD), the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education (IDCE), the University of Guyana Faculty of Education and Regional Education Offices.

- Dissemination of the research findings, which culminated in a seminar to draw up action plans to carry forward the development of distance education nationally. This seminar, held in May 2000, was designed to engage key decision makers and stakeholders in distance education and teacher training in Guyana. Its purpose was not solely to make these people aware of the conclusions of the research studies conducted under GUIDE but, more importantly, to create an opportunity for this wider community to reflect on outcomes of, and issues raised by, the research and to convert these reflections into a coordinated

approach throughout the planning of relevant components of each institution's activities.

The GUIDE Database

One of DFID's requirements was that a baseline study should be undertaken to assess and record the level of GUIDE's students and provide a measure against which progress could be monitored. To facilitate this it was necessary to establish a database of student records in GUIDE. Transfer of the skills to develop, maintain and use such a database took place over many months. Stages in this process were as follow:

- Attachment to the UK of a GUIDE member of staff

- Incountry training

- Sharing of live files through the use of e-mail

- Continuing support, from the UK and through follow-up incountry visits, as the GUIDE unit and researchers developed their use and exploitation of the database.

Learning was done using real data from the outset. Data and access to it were tailored specifically to research needs.

The value of this database has been recognized widely in Guyana, and later training events have included the Guyana Basic Education Training (GBET) project and other interested stakeholders in the education sector as participants alongside the GUIDE staff who maintain and expand the database.

As has been mentioned, the database was designed to meet the specific record keeping and analytical needs of GUIDE and of the research projects commissioned under GUIDE. From the outset, however, an aim has been to make the experience, the skills, and the data collected available as a

resource to other legitimately interested parties. Accordingly, the national advisory committee on distance education and specifically interested units such as GBET, IDCE and MoE have been engaged in discussions on adopting or adapting the GUIDE database for their respective requirements. The data accumulated are also established as baseline data to act as a resource for future longitudinal studies on GUIDE students and graduates. The lessons learned from the process of developing, maintaining and querying the database are available to feed into other education sector information systems initiatives.

Conclusions

The process of developing the human resource at GUIDE has led to improved performance of GUIDE and its staff. It has also provided the means to build capacity of a much broader nature. So often it is the case that information and learning from one project is not shared effectively with other projects or institutions that we must ask ourselves why this aspect of GUIDE has been so successful in Guyana. To find the answer to this we must consider not only the players in this drama but also the stage.

Guyana is a small state; it has a population of between 800, 000 and 900,000 and covers approximately 215,000 square kilometres of mostly rather inaccessible mountains and rivers. Most of the population lives in the relatively developed coastal strip. Those living in the hinterland are very thinly scattered and far more isolated from education and other services delivered from central government or private agencies. Delivery of education under these conditions requires innovative and ingenious methods. There is a deep interest in distance education in the country but there are a small number of institutions and individuals involved. The timing was right for such cooperation, as

Guyana seeks to provide better education to its communities, particularly those marginalized by inaccessibility: the country is hungry to learn the lessons of the projects and programmes it is fostering.

There are four main characters operating on this stage whose performances we should consider carefully.

GUIDE itself is a small project with a narrow focus but in putting forward its agenda it has addressed wider issues, it has engaged interest and sought support from Guyana's experts in the MoE, the University of Guyana and in other projects. It has done this through its structure of an inclusive Project Steering Committee; through engaging individuals from other institutions in the education sector as resource persons in its course development, tutoring and research activities; through its active pursuit of openness, sharing and exchanging with other projects and units with compatible aims and concerns in the country; and through maintaining good personal contact with relevant offices, both in central institutions and in the outlying regions where the course is being run, wherever possible involving these people in GUIDE planning and development activities. GUIDE often talks of itself as a 'family' and, as in a family, while there may be disagreements, all voices are listened to, problems are talked over openly and the underlying assumption is that every member is responsible in some way to all the others. Being part of this 'family' gives staff the confidence to look outwardly from GUIDE.

The MoE was right to make GUIDE an integrated unit and to retain a stake in this unit and its affairs. The ministry has been interested in making the project work and has been active and involved in the research. The ministry, regional education offices, regional administration, teacher trainers and other stakeholders have joined together in the Project Steering Committee, which decides policy and pushes matters forward. This committee is chaired by the permanent secretary of the MoE, and includes very senior figures such as the chief planning officer and the chief education officer, as well as core GUIDE staff. Thus GUIDE both enjoys a level of operational autonomy and also is integrally tied into and answerable to a wider constituency.

Often we find funders are remote from a project, seemingly only interested in financial accountability and reports. Not so DFID with GUIDE. The DFID representative in Georgetown cares deeply for Guyana and for GUIDE. He has been led by project needs as we see reflected in a willingness evidenced to use funds in ways that benefit the wider community at the same time as promoting GUIDE's aims and capacity. Aside from the definite effect of individual personalities here, this perhaps reflects a positive effect of the structure DFID now adopts of having an education field manager (EFM) incountry – an education professional, but not attached to any single project. This structure arguably seems to encourage a close interest, understanding, responsiveness and responsibility from the EFM post along with the distance needed to draw broader connections and to encourage integration of the project with wider educational and developmental aims.

IEC itself is a small professional organization that devotes itself to providing what is needed incountry rather than arriving with ready-made solutions. It works using participatory techniques to identify issues and problems on the ground and then facilitates the development of solutions. IEC has worked at a distance on this project, fostering independence and self-reliance but making itself available as a sounding board at all times. Project needs are the first priority. Through such a relationship, the external technical support agency can achieve a healthy balance between personal involvement and understanding between staff of

the respective organizations and remaining distant enough not to compromise the project staff's autonomy or stifle their decision making or ability to find creative solutions. In short, it does not deny them the learning experience, which can be the case with provision of too direct a form of technical support.

A Closing Word

In this paper we have highlighted an example of how technical assistance to a narrowly focused project can have a wider HRD impact than would be defined by addressing solely the immediate needs of the project. We have also suggested the potential developmental benefits of such a broader view and that it is not only compatible with but can also enhance achieving the specific objectives of such a project.