

# Unit 14 : Course maintenance and revision

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## Introduction

The editor has to ensure that a course remains suitable for the students. It is part of the editor's job to deal with errors, to keep courses up to date, and deal with courses that are too difficult or otherwise unsatisfactory. The editor must therefore be responsible for organising course corrections, revision or replacement.

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

- \* collect data on courses;
- \* carry out a periodic assessment of the course;
- \* maintain your courses;
- \* decide whether to revise materials, what to revise, and how.

Course maintenance and revision should form only a minor proportion of total editorial workload. It is, however, an important aspect of editorial work, and an institution must establish procedures to ensure that they are dealt with regularly and efficiently. The emphasis in this unit is on administration. The quality of courses depends on thoughtful planning and administration.

This unit will take about an hour to complete and the assignment will take 1 or 2 hours.

## 1. Collecting data about a course

You need to identify errors and take action to correct them at any time. First, how do you discover errors? If you simply wait for users of the materials to point out errors, you may never find them. I once discovered a completely senseless paragraph in a course that had been in use for 10 years. The typist had left out several lines. Nobody had informed the editor, although anyone who had read the lesson would notice the mistake. Distant students are often ready to blame themselves rather than writers or printers when they do not understand something, and this must have happened in this case.

You must therefore encourage people to tell you about errors:

- \* You can encourage students to tell their tutors. Some institutions use 'difficulty' sheets, where they note points they do not understand. Sometimes they will note errors on these as well as problems.
- \* You can encourage tutors to tell you about errors.
- \* Students may tell you directly. You can enclose forms with their lessons, on which they note errors.
- \* You may notice errors yourself.
- \* Anyone else who looks at the material may notice errors.

As soon as a course is printed, open a file for corrections. Every time anyone notifies you of an error, record it in the file. The most usual way of doing this is to take a copy of the course book and label it 'Editor's marked copy'. Then you mark every correction in this copy. Use a bright-coloured pencil or pen so that each mark is clearly visible. This copy is important, so keep it safely, and never use it for any other purpose. Never lend it or give it away.

You can collect other feedback on a regular basis. Some of this feedback is systematic. For example, student records will tell you whether the average student gets good or bad marks on a particular assignment. If most of the students get good marks on Assignment A and bad marks on Assignment B, you can guess that there is something wrong either with the assignment or with the unit leading up to it. If you examine the student records on a regular basis, you will soon discover which courses or units the students do badly.

You can also collect students' assessment of the material. Usually each time a student sends in an assignment, he must complete a form giving his name, student number and other personal data. You can include on this form a small number of questions about the course itself.

You might have questions like:

The unit was much too long

slightly too long

just right

too short

The unit was much too difficult

slightly too difficult

just right

too easy

(Tick the appropriate box)

Unit 10 contains some more examples. Students will generally fill in such forms automatically when they send in their work to the tutor.

This technique has a major disadvantage. You collect a great many forms, often so many that the information is unusable. I once had to throw away thousands, because I had no time to analyse them.

If you have a computer, perhaps such information is of use. However, you still have to record the data on the computer. Do several thousand forms collected as a matter of routine give you more or better information than a few hundred?

Information collected unsystematically is also useful. You can, for example, include a 'course comments' page with each course book. Students are invited to write their comments, favourable or unfavourable, and their suggestions on the page and send it to the editor. Or you can simply invite them, somewhere in the text, to write you a letter. Only a few students will do this, and these will generally be either the keen students or the angry ones who have some complaint. So you will not receive a balanced view of the course, but you will receive some useful opinions. You should file these with your 'Editor's marked copy'.

Another informal way to collect information is meetings with students. Try to attend students' seminars or vacation courses, and discuss the course with students.

What do you do with all this information? To start with, it is impractical and expensive to notify every student every time a mistake is noticed. It is too expensive to reprint complete units because they contain several mistakes. The first job is to decide whether corrections need to be made urgently or whether they can wait. Decide which errors are serious enough to mislead students, and then prepare an errata sheet. This lists page and line references, gives the error, and gives the correct version, like this:

Page 12, line 15: 'telephone' should read 'television'.

Sometimes a complete sentence or paragraph will be given.

When there is a more substantial mistake, for example an assignment turns out to be unsuitable, a complete page or even several pages can be rewritten and printed separately.

In both cases, the sheets of paper are sent to all students already studying, and inserted into all new volumes despatched to students.

Errata pages should always be dated and coded with a number. If more errors are discovered, you would normally replace the first page with an updated version.

To ensure that students always receive errata sheets and the like, you can use the course contents list. Look back at Example 41, and you will see it lists 3 errata sheets, one with each volume. The course contents list must always be updated when a new errata sheet is added.

In cases where part of a course is slightly unsatisfactory, it is usually necessary to wait until the course is revised (see section 3). It is not possible to revise courses simply because they can be improved. It is expensive to produce printed materials, so that course correction and revision must be planned, just as initial course development is planned.

#### EXERCISE 1

You have recently launched a new mathematics course, and you receive the following letter from a student. What do you do?

Dear Sir

I am very disappointed in the mathematics course I bought from you. I paid a lot of money for it, and now I find all the answers given for exercises in Unit 1 are wrong. This is not good enough. Please send me back my money.

Yours faithfully  
John Mbiri

(5 minutes)

#### Comment

This is serious, if the student is right. Your first step must be to check if he is correct. Perhaps he was confused and looked in the wrong place for the answers. Or perhaps he could not do the work and thought his answers were correct and the book was wrong.

You check and discover the student is right. The answers have been numbered wrongly, so every answer given is wrong. First, a letter of apology must be sent as soon as possible to the student, probably signed by your director. The letter should also thank him for pointing out the error, and send him the correct version. You hope that in the circumstances he will decide to keep the course.

Next, this is clearly an important error and should be corrected immediately. As it involves a complete set of answers, it will probably be best to reprint a complete page. The correct page must be sent to every student as soon as possible, and copies must go to the despatch department with instructions for distributing the page with future course books.

You must also alter the course contents list, if you have one, and any other relevant records concerning the course material.

## 2. Periodic assessment

You will need to make a periodic check on the course to see if change is necessary. Institutions usually have a policy of assessing courses after a fixed period of operation, often 5 or 7 years. In practice, assessment is often less frequent, as pressure of work means course revisions have to be postponed.

For course assessment, we can choose from a range of methods, and will usually use several together.

- a. We should consult any data already in the file.
- b. We can send a questionnaire to a sample of students.
- c. We can send a questionnaire to tutors.
- d. We can obtain an external assessment of the course materials. We would ask a respected authority in the subject to check the material and comment on it.
- e. We can consult experts and people known for their innovative approaches to the subject to find out about the latest methods of teaching the subject. We can then decide if there has been a major change since the course was started.
- f. We can, if we can find them, consult some former students on the course to see if, retrospectively, it was as useful as they had hoped.
- g. We can consult potential students, to see what they hope to gain from studying the subject.

If you need further advice on techniques of monitoring and assessment, consult Roger Mitton's manual Practical Research in Distance Teaching published by IEC.

When you have collected and analysed your data, what should you do? If the course needs revising, section 4 will explain what to do. But often, the course will still be good. You can continue to offer it, perhaps with very minor changes.

How long can you keep the same course? A good course should remain usable for many years, but perhaps when material is over 10 years old it is time to consider replacing it or revising it. Even if the course content is satisfactory, written material begins to read as old-fashioned after a few years, and students will notice. This is a matter you must judge for yourself.

### EXERCISE 2

At the beginning of the section, I mentioned that institutions sometimes postpone course assessment because other work gets priority. Now you have read the section, what do you think about this? Is it wise to postpone assessment?

(5 minutes)

### Comment

If a course has major problems, students' comments or records will inform

you of this without assessment. But your institution is open to criticism if it runs courses which have not been recently assessed. Moreover, routine assessment can sometimes unearth quite serious criticisms of courses which you thought were good.

### 3. Course maintenance

Course maintenance means keeping courses up to date. You will need to keep track of stocks and, before reprinting, insert all corrections and amendments. If there are changes in the curriculum or the exam syllabus, you have to update the material. Similarly, if there are changes in the world at large, such as political changes, you may have to change material. Even today, some courses from Southern African countries still refer to Rhodesia, while in the 1980s I came across a British course which talked about Tanganyika. There may also be changes in resources linked with the course: a new edition of a textbook, with different page numbering; a reference book which goes out of print; references to radio programmes which are no longer broadcast. The editor has to keep track of all these kinds of changes, and act to update the course material.

How do you know that a course needs updating? This is difficult, but you need not leave it entirely to chance. Use the same course file which you use for corrections and comments to file records of any points you notice that will need checking. Every year, check the status of all your courses, in case you have overlooked something that needs attention.

What can you do if change is needed? You can issue updating slips, in the same way as you produce errata sheets. For example, if the course contains page references to a textbook which need changing for a new edition, list the new references on a loose sheet of paper. If the stocks of the course are very low, you might decide not to use the remaining books and reprint an amended edition immediately. Or you may decide to issue a short booklet to supplement the course, covering a new element in the syllabus. Supplementary booklets are quick to produce and cheaper than revising a complete course.

Try to design courses so that they will accommodate routine changes, and reduce the work of course maintenance to a minimum. If tutor-marked assignments must be changed with every new intake of students, arrange for them to be printed separately from the course units. You do not need to reprint all units every time you issue new assignments. If a course has optional components which change from time to time, print option booklets separately. If an exam syllabus is likely to change, or a course leads to more than one exam, print books for a 'core' course, covering the main components, and separate booklets for exam practice and other additional material. Try to think ahead to save yourself unnecessary work and save your institution unnecessary expense.

### 4. Revising courses

Revising a course means changing it in such a way that many pages of the course, or even all of it, are changed. This means it must be completely reprinted. It is different from correcting or amending the course, when only a few pages are changed.

Let us imagine you have some criticisms of a course, and you are trying to decide whether or not to revise it. What factors could influence your decision?

- a. How old is the course? Is it only a few years old, or has it been on offer so long that you should change it?
- b. How successful has it been? Do positive reactions from tutors and students outweigh criticisms?
- c. Have you had time to evaluate the course properly? If it has only been offered for a year or two, you will not have a clear all-round picture of what revisions are needed. (This does not apply to a pilot version of a course, which should be revised after a year or two.)
- d. What stocks of the course do you have already printed? If you have many copies left, you probably cannot afford to waste them. If you have few copies left, you may have time to revise before reprinting.
- e. How much longer will the course be on offer? If it will be withdrawn in a year or two, it is hardly worth revising.
- f. How many students does the course have? If it has few students, you probably cannot justify the cost of revision.
- g. Do you have sufficient printing capacity and finance to produce the revised version? Unplanned revision could have drastic effects on your institution's efficiency and on its finances.
- h. What priorities does your institution have? Sometimes you may have to choose between revising an old course and introducing a new one. Which is more important to your institution?

If a course is unsatisfactory, and it is impractical or uneconomic to revise it, you may have to consider withdrawing it, temporarily or permanently. If you remain uncertain about whether or not to revise a course, it usually means that the course is at least passable, and can continue to run for a little longer.

How do you decide what to revise? The whole course, or part of it? If you decide that the whole course needs substantial alteration, you should perhaps consider replacing the course. You could commission an entirely new course. But usually, in course revision, some sections or units are completely rewritten, others amended, and some remain unchanged. That is, only those parts of the course which are too difficult, teach badly, or are out-of-date, are changed.

Revision ought to take place on a planned basis. Your institution might plan to revise, say, three courses out of 30 each year. Thus, each course would be revised every 10 years. It is normally quite impossible to revise all courses at once. Revision must be included in a course production schedule.

To revise a course, you should follow the same course development plan that you use for a new course. You will be able to take some short cuts, however, and there will be much less work to do.

You will have to identify a writer for the revisions. Often, the best writer is the person who wrote the course originally, but she may be unable or unwilling to revise a course after a gap of several years. If you can use the same writer, you will usually find that she is quite critical of what was written some years ago, and quite receptive to new

ideas. After all, if she was not prepared to alter the course, she would not agree to revise it.

If you cannot use the same writer, you could appoint one of the course tutors, who is already quite familiar with the material, or you might have to appoint someone who had no previous contact with the course. These people may have no experience of writing for distance education, and it could be expensive to train them for a minor job like revision. Another more serious difficulty is that new writers usually want to reshape the course completely. They want to rewrite it in their own way. It can be difficult, even impossible, to persuade them that a good part of the course is tried and tested and only some parts need changing.

Another possibility is for you, the editor, to undertake the revisions. If you have the necessary subject knowledge, this can be a way to overcome the difficulties outlined above.

### Summary

This unit has suggested that once a course is in operation, you should collect data on errors and monitor the course carefully. Where necessary, correct the errors. After a few years, assess each course thoroughly and if necessary revise it. An institution needs a policy on course revision, to ensure that quality is maintained.

### ASSIGNMENT L

Draft a plan for systematic course revision for your institution. Think about how often courses should be evaluated. Think about how many can be revised each year. Try to fit in every course to your plan.

If your institution already has a course revision plan in operation, consider how far it fits with the suggestions in this unit, and propose changes as necessary.

Discuss your ideas with colleagues. Perhaps your plan can be adopted by your institution, if it is generally liked.