

Writing clubs ensure sustainable skills development

Different levels of mentoring enable research communication skills to be shared with more junior colleagues in writing club model

Getting papers published is a key part of ensuring that work reaches people who can use that research, either directly to solve a problem or as a basis for their own research. At the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka, getting research published comes with an additional incentive: postgraduates in Sri Lanka need to publish two papers before they can graduate with a PhD.

Getting published is important but it is also not easy, especially for researchers in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This is a challenge that the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Colombo identified in establishing, with INASP's AuthorAID project, a new programme to help academic staff and postgraduate students develop their research-writing skills.



A Research Promotion and Facilitation Centre was set up in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Colombo in 2013

The Faculty of Medicine of the University of Colombo is the second oldest medical school in South Asia. Established in 1870, it now comprises 14 departments and five units, with a student body that has grown from an initial intake of 25 students to 1,533 students today.

Being able to communicate research findings in a clear and scientifically robust way is an essential skill for early-career researchers, ultimately allowing their research to be shared, debated and gain the credibility it needs to be taken seriously. However, as with many institutions in low- and middle-income countries, the university has struggled in the past to provide locally-led training on scientific research writing. Resources are limited, and many faculty members struggle to find the time to improve their research communication skills in order to produce much-desired publications. Researchers often also have difficulty finding suitable

academic mentors who can support them with their writing or provide advice on publishing.

According to Dr. Tharanga Thoradeniya, a member of the RPFCL leadership team, and Senior Lecturer in Biochemistry, until recently, many universities in Sri Lanka “did not have separate programmes for research-writing support. Students also really struggled to write and they worked in silos, separate from each other.”

In 2013, a partnership between the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka and INASP's AuthorAID programme was launched with the objective of supporting the faculty to develop scientific research-writing skills for academic staff and postgraduate students.

The Research Promotion and Facilitation Centre (RPFCL) of the Faculty of Medicine has since established a comprehensive



Writing clubs

Writing clubs since 2014: 4

Mentors: 51
(18 men; 33 women)

Mentees: 96
(26 men; 70 women)

Publications so far: 10

programme to support scientific research writing using a combination of approaches including training, mentoring, writing clubs and an online facility to share resources. The RPFC model ensures ongoing support to early-career researchers, many of whom are women, in finishing a manuscript and getting published.

Writing skills as part of research promotion

The writing clubs evolved out of the establishment of the Research Promotion and Facilitation Centre (RPFC). This centre was originally a component of a larger project funded by the World Bank in 2013. The Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century (HETC) project aimed to enhance the capacity of the higher-education system, institutions and human resources; it comprised a component that provided quality and innovation grants to facilitate and promote postgraduate research with the main goal of developing the centralized research support centre.

Prof. Nadira Karunaweera, Head of the Department of Parasitology, was the Coordinator of the World Bank-funded project and is in charge of the RPFC. Nadira was nominated by the National Science Foundation of Sri Lanka to attend two workshops: one in May 2013 organized by the Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA) facilitated by Barbara Gastel, an AuthorAID Associate and one of the academics involved in the initial launch of AuthorAID; another at



Medical researchers at University of Colombo share ways to improve research communication

the National Science Foundation on online learning facilitated by another AuthorAID Associate, Ravi Murugesan.

Out of this, Nadira realized the value in incorporating scientific research-writing training into the World Bank project, and she handed the responsibility over to her younger colleague Dr. Dilshani Dissanayake. Dilshani was also nominated by Nadira to attend Barbara's workshop at the SLMA, in order to begin development of a research-writing programme within the medical faculty. As the lead person in the newly established RPFC (within the HETC project), Dilshani was well-placed to take on this responsibility. Having experience with AuthorAID workshops and wanting to make training the focus of their programme, Nadira and Dilshani approached INASP to partner with the RPFC in the development of the programme.

The Faculty of Medicine signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with INASP in November 2013 for a two-year period of support, to help in the development of the research-writing component of the RPFC programme. As part of this agreement, the RPFC was offered a scholarship opportunity by INASP for Tharanga to attend a four-week intensive course at Texas A&M University, USA on the

principles and practice of scientific research writing. While there, she was impressed by the emphasis placed on peer-to-peer learning, and the sharing of experiences between academics in support of finalizing a paper. Tharanga returned to the University of Colombo as an expert resource to support implementing the research-writing programme.

The writing-club model

Initial locally-tailored workshops on research writing and mentoring were held in the Faculty of Medicine with INASP support. However, the group quickly realized that, following the workshop, there needed to be something more to support their academics in finishing off their writing projects. Dilshani proposed the writing club model of RPFC and invited Dr. Sharmila Jayasena, another senior female academic, to coordinate the first writing club.

Writing clubs bring all of the pieces of the research-writing programme together. They underpin and consolidate the learning from the workshops; provide an opportunity for its members to receive mentoring support (not only by more senior academics but also by like-minded peers); and act as a practical exercise in finalizing



a paper by creating the time and space for focusing on writing. The writing clubs are held over a period of four months, with monthly face-to-face meetings to allow the participants to progress the writing of their papers during that period.

The clubs are run by someone with a certain amount of experience and at least three publications, and who has committed to devoting their time to supporting young researchers in their writing – as well as younger mentors known as ‘junior mentors’ who would learn from the senior mentor and develop their own skills with the aim of one day running their own writing club. Dividing mentoring into senior mentors and junior mentors was important to the newly-established RPFC – not only did it provide the senior mentor(s) with the opportunity to divide some of the workload, but it also provided junior mentors with the opportunity to shadow senior mentors and develop their own mentoring skills, allowing them to eventually develop into senior roles within the university. For these junior mentors, it also created a comfort level for any young academics undergoing mentoring as there could sometimes be reluctance on the part of a young researcher to approach a senior academic directly. Having both junior and senior mentors helped to break down some of these barriers and encouraged them to talk more freely with their senior peers.

Implementing the model

Following the inception phase, the programme kicked off in 2014 with two one-day training sessions on scientific research writing and one two-day mentoring workshop.

The first writing club was launched in November of that year, with the team encountering their first



RPFC staff and INASP staff share ideas about research writing clubs

challenge: recruiting mentors. In her initial request for mentors, Dilshani found that many of her fellow academics had a lack of understanding of the merits of initiating a writing programme, and many worried about the time commitment. Dilshani explains, “My first email circulated around the university was not too popular. I ended up using my own network and inviting my own friends to participate.” As a result of tapping into her own network, she managed to pull together a committed group of mentors and mentees for this first club, with 31 mentees and 10 mentors. The club participants were divided into small groups comprising two mentors, one senior mentor, and one mid-career (or ‘junior’) mentor in each group.

The first club met three times between November 2014 and March 2015. The main outcome of this first round of club meetings was that it was a struggle to keep both mentors and mentees motivated to attend. As a result, the RPFC leaders took steps to determine ways to incentivize participation on the course by outlining its benefits (such as better access to senior academics, the ability to produce more publications, and the opportunity to develop one’s own mentoring skills). They also organized a second research-

writing workshop facilitated by Barbara Gastel in March 2015 on ‘effective mentorship in research communication’ to encourage the mentors and mentees to build their skills, discuss their challenges, and cultivate possible solutions.

The result of this overarching focus on mentorship and peer-to-peer learning is that the writing clubs and mentor support have become the main focus of RPFC’s research-writing programme. The original aim of holding research-writing workshops has been moved aside in favour of this more interactive level of support. Workshops are still run from time to time to help researchers brush up on skills, but these are organized on a more ad-hoc basis. Instead, the RPFC encourages its researchers to take the bi-annual AuthorAID-run online courses in research writing, at which senior academics like Dilshani act as guest facilitators.

Since the launch of the partnership between INASP and the Faculty of Medicine in November 2013, RPFC has run three additional writing clubs (four in total), all building on the experience of the previous ones. They have also developed guidance for both mentors and mentees to ensure roles and responsibilities are clear. Specifically, mentors are expected to motivate and guide in identifying



Members of the Faculty of Medicine at University of Colombo listen to AuthorAID Associate Barbara Gastel share tips for effective research communication during a workshop in March 2015

the focus of a paper, in developing a writing style, and in selecting a suitable journal. They also help by providing deadlines for sections of the papers to be drafted; giving constructive criticism; and monitoring overall progress. It is also made clear that any scientific or data analysis, accuracy of results and interpretation and writing are the responsibilities of the researcher mentees, not the mentors. The mentees are encouraged to be committed to their writing, to support their peers and to make use of the expertise of the mentors. They are also encouraged to acknowledge the assistance of the mentors in the acknowledgements sections of their papers. To better encourage the mentees, the mentors have started referring to mentees as authors instead, as a way of validating their time spent in the club.

Outcomes

The writing clubs have, in effect, evolved into the focal point of the writing programme. Nadira, Tharanga and Dilshani all believe that the clubs have been integral to the programme's success. The

majority of participants leave the club with a draft paper, and although club participants don't always communicate publications, they calculate that at least 10 manuscripts have been published as a result of the clubs.

The clubs have clearly had an impact on **writing skills**. In particular, the RPFC believes students are now more motivated; participation in the clubs has sparked a desire and confidence on their part to publish more. Senior mentors have likewise seen an improvement in the ability of academics at the university to edit and **peer review** their colleagues' work. There has been a marked improvement in **English language** writing skills as the clubs encourage students to focus on their writing in English, boosting their confidence and skills. With many young researchers developing their own mentoring skills, a **new generation** of mentors has emerged. This new cohort of junior mentors were significant improvers from the workshop and writing clubs (generally, these are mentees who went on to write and publish)

who were then invited to take on a new role as a junior mentor. Many of them now support the senior mentors in the writing clubs.

Lessons learnt

The RPFC team have learnt some interesting lessons throughout this process. It has not necessarily all been smooth - in the beginning, motivating mentors was a struggle. They decided to address this by providing mentors with a small fee for their time. Not all mentors take the fee - some of the retired faculty members are happy to donate their time. This support from the retired academic community to offer mentoring services has been invaluable, with many of these mentors going above what might be expected in their support of students because they have fewer time constraints.

However, **time commitment** in general remains an issue, so the RPFC have taken steps to incentivize the workshops and clubs so that faculty and students are more likely to carve out time in their schedules to take part. For mentees, a mandatory requirement

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Jennifer Perera, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine





Writing clubs are small groups that include senior mentors, junior mentors and early-career researchers

at the university requires them to publish two papers before they submit their PhD for review, thus incentivizing the time spent in a writing club. Through INASP members of the writing club can also benefit from free **copyediting** and language editing support from American Journal Experts, which helps with finalizing their papers.

Often, academics writing in English as a second language must pay for expensive online copyediting services, so the provision of free editing services is significant and has acted as a major incentive.

Younger academics have also been enticed by the opportunity to be seen by, and interact with,

senior colleagues. This **exposure** between early-career researchers and senior faculty encourages progression within the institution and helps with promotion. For junior mentors, the opportunity to develop leadership and mentoring skills is important, along with the opportunity to build confidence to both write and interact with colleagues at all levels. The clubs also provide opportunities for **networking** across subject areas – this is their version of peer-to-peer learning, and it is seen as an important way to encourage research cooperation and collaboration.

With respect to workshop participation, the RPFC team have observed that an international trainer, rather than a local or institutional trainer, often brings a certain element of prestige that encourages workshop attendance. This isn't ideal – the INASP-RPFC partnership is designed to build local capacity to run workshops and writing clubs. The enticement to attend workshops should be because of the learning opportunity and not necessarily because of who is leading the training. However, as the programme has progressed and improved in quality, the team have found that this issue has lessened. Most participants now appreciate the meaning and impact of the

Beyond Colombo

Looking outside of the University of Colombo itself, the RPFC built into its model the aim of working more closely with other faculties and universities in Sri Lanka, to both share the knowledge they have learnt, and to support them in developing their own writing clubs and mentoring programmes. A mentoring workshop held in March 2016 at the RPFC invited academics from medical, dental and veterinary faculties in Sri Lanka (the University of Peradeniya) and Bangladesh (BRAC University) to be trained in developing writing clubs at their own institutions. As a result, both universities have designed their own proposals to run similar research-writing programmes at their institutions, and are now working with INASP in similar partnerships.

The RPFC has also recently established an online learning platform on Moodle to run online courses as part of the writing club, and for communicating and sharing resources among the cohorts of researchers participating in the writing clubs. This has facilitated continuous learning through the online forum, leading to better communication in between the monthly club meetings.

Development of a research-writing support programme (RWSP) encompassing the workshops, online learning and the writing clubs was developed by RPFC with INASP expertise during a three-day workshop held in Colombo in August 2016. Ravi Murugesan and Joanna Wild from INASP conducted the workshop with the core group of the RWSP of RPFC. Dr. Shreenika Weliange took over the task of facilitating the newly introduced online training component assisted by Dr. Asela Olupeliyawa. The first RWSP concluded successfully on 13 February 2017.



course and it is gaining a good reputation within the faculty and beyond.

Importantly, a '**champion**' for the programme internally is a main driver for success. Everyone at RPFC has noted how important it is to have one person to push everything forward and keep everyone to task. Likewise, this champion needs to have the ear of senior leadership to ensure the programme remains a priority within the faculty. In this case, the senior RPFC team have, from the start, had the support of their dean, and they credit this as giving them the space to design the programme. Nadira points out that "providing a physical space within the administrative building of the faculty was one of the pledges made by the university administration when the initial agreement was signed between us and the World. We were lucky as a result to continue to use this space for RPFC activities for the faculty, providing a dedicated space."

The current Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Jennifer Perera, outlines why she thinks the programme has been so successful, "I am amazed at the unbelievable enthusiasm of those leading the way in promoting young researchers in addressing the gaps in their respective research work. The RPFC has identified the main gaps which stem from the lack of appropriate skills required to convert research into published work. We have been impressed with the passion of those leading the RPFC programme of mentoring and writing clubs, and for achieving the ultimate targets set out."

There have been discussions on programme sustainability beyond the period of AuthorAID funding. The RPFC team have resisted charging fees to the writing club participants, and believe that, with the use of an online portal to enable remote communication



Certificates help acknowledge the training that writing-club participants undertake

between mentors and mentees, this will make the process less costly in terms of time and resources. They also believe that it is possible to keep the programme running if the university covers the minor costs of printing and refreshments for workshops, with the meeting room provided in-kind. Fee levying for workshops is also a possibility, and the RPFC have started to consider charging small fees to ensure workshops continue to run alongside writing clubs.

Why was this approach distinctive?

Taking a step back, it is interesting to consider the unique nature of this model within the AuthorAID programme. As with most AuthorAID embedding partners, the initial objectives of the agreement with INASP were to train a number of trainers in the faculty so that they could run research-writing training sessions. The creation of the RPFC was intended to facilitate and promote research communication across the faculty, and early on it was understood that ongoing writing support would be needed beyond attendance in a one-off training activity. The clubs themselves encourage success by operating with **consistent follow-up**. There is an ongoing support mechanism for a period of four

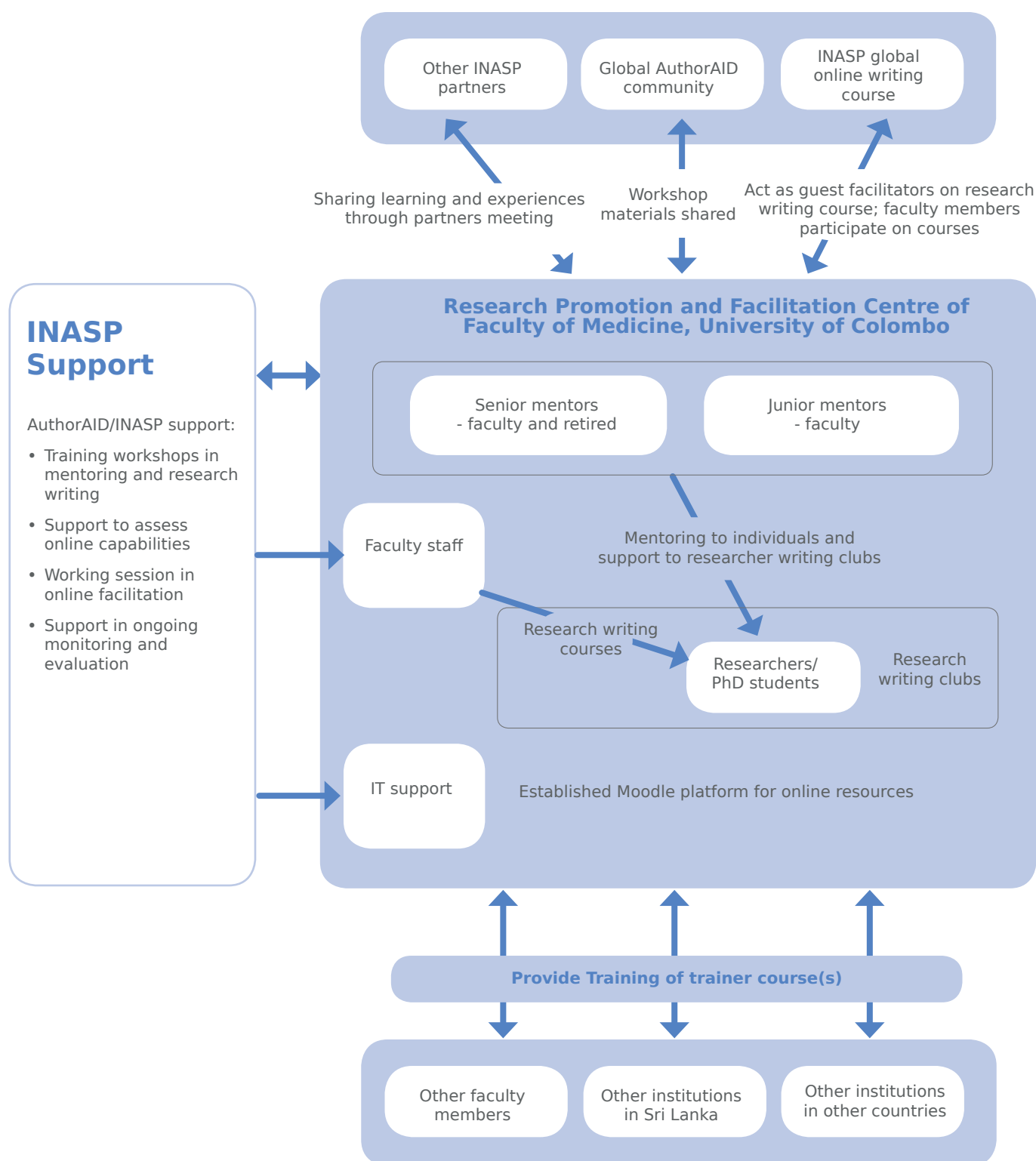
months, with access to a senior colleague for advice and review and regular check-ins that also serve as a deadline reminder.

The writing clubs are distinctive in comparison with the training models of other AuthorAID partners because they are part of a **comprehensive support** system. The time, knowledge and effort needed to build such a programme often acts as an obstacle to its launch, with the time spent recruiting and motivating mentors an initial disincentive. Institutions starting out on the journey of developing a writing programme often have many competing priorities, and workshops are the first step. Ongoing and inter-workshop support can fall down the list of priorities when there is the institutional demand to provide workshop-style training, as well as other faculty demands which means time is tight for new initiatives.

With a view to sustainability, at the top of the RPFC there is a group of **core leaders** who, as mentioned earlier, are able to trade roles when one of them finds they are too busy or must leave their position. Within the writing clubs, the development of **junior mentors** builds skills for young academics to progress within their institution, creating the next generation of leaders in



Embedding research writing: the case of one institution



the university. The support of the junior mentors also reduces the workload for the senior mentors, and so ensures they have the time to devote to the clubs.

One of the most interesting elements of the RPFC model has been their commitment throughout to sharing their experiences, and teaching others, within their network in Sri Lanka and beyond. In essence, they are building a community of practice. Now two other universities in Sri Lanka and

Bangladesh are about to embark on a similar process with the overarching objective of improving research communication among their researchers. In addition to this, members of the RPFC leadership also support AuthorAID online courses by acting as guest facilitators and by sharing their resources and materials. This is their way of giving back to the AuthorAID community.

It is interesting to note that the leadership team in this programme

constitutes almost all women. While the women claim that gender is not a significant issue within their faculty, the fact that the programme is led by an all-female team does provide for some very positive role models for other female researchers. This also has (perhaps involuntarily) led to fairly equal representation by both genders within the clubs and the mentoring roles.

With the establishment of the new online learning platform to complement the writing clubs, the writing capacity now offers a holistic support system, using face-to-face learning, online courses and collaboration, mentoring and regular meetings via writing clubs. [Learn more about the online learning component in the follow-up case study].

What lessons can be applied to future embedding partnerships?

The RPFC team believe they have learnt some valuable lessons about institutionalizing this kind of support. First off, they say not to get hung up on small failures; not everything works the first time you try out. Tharanga notes, “there are always obstacles, but make sure you focus on the individual impacts; each person will gain something from their experience. And keep applying what you have learnt as you go through. Nothing is finite.”

In RPFC’s own report of the programme, it concluded that the keys to success have been a set of clear objectives and a committed leadership. The objectives were focused on and quickly drafted at the start because of a need to kick off the programme; this meant they were developed efficiently and could be revisited as needed. The committed leadership has also been integral. The core group at the top were all equally dedicated to the aims of the programme, and they developed a system of trading responsibilities when one or more of them were busy with other commitments. The time spent thinking about sustainability is also key; developing a system of senior and junior mentors means there will always be new mentors for the writing clubs.

However, it is important to note that not all institutions are equal in respect to time, resources, infrastructure and capacity to run writing clubs like these. RPFC benefited from the initial support of the World Bank in developing a centre devoted to research; this meant that the INASP support complemented an already-devoted set of resources for research. Many institutions who work with INASP are just starting out on this path, and the partnership often centres on supporting them to build a devoted team that will improve this type of research capacity.

Finally, the equal partnership between INASP and the RPFC is an important success factor of the programme. Often, support and capacity-building partnerships are imbalanced in favour of the Northern partner, but what is interesting about this partnership is how equal the partnership was, and continues to be. RPFC appreciates the support and lessons learnt shared by INASP but also understands the context of the support on offer, and how important it is to adapt to local needs. As a result, the centre developed its own innovations and ideas, all of which made the programme richer and ultimately led to its success.

INASP Team

University of Colombo

Prof. Nadira Karunaweera,
Person in Charge, RPFC,
Head of the Department of
Parasitology

Dr. Dilshani Dissanayake,
RPFC, Lead Senior lecturer
in Department of Physiology

Dr. Tharanga Thoradeniya,
Coordinator of MoU with
INASP, Senior Lecturer,
Biochemistry

Dr. Sharmila Jayasena,
Writing Club Coordinator,
Senior Lecturer,
Microbiology

INASP

Jennifer Chapin, Programme
Manager, Research and
Communication, AuthorAID

Barbara Gastel, AuthorAID
Associate, INASP

Julie Walker, former
AuthorAID Director, INASP

