Training Institutes: Attaining a Higher Level of Functioning

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INTRODUCTION

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In its message dated 29 December 2015 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the Universal House of Justice stated that attaining a higher level of functioning is a pressing concern of training institutes. This concern comes into sharp focus when viewed in the context of the goals before the Bahá'í world during this Five Year Plan: to "seek to raise the number of clusters where a programme of growth has become intensive to 5,000 by Riḍván 2021"[1] and to add "several hundred more"[2] to some two hundred clusters that have already advanced beyond the third milestone. As stated by the House of Justice:

> The community's efforts to fortify programmes of growth in thousands of clusters and sustain their intensification will place heavy demands on these agencies. Their focus, of course, is the unfoldment of the three stages of the educational process they oversee and the strengthening of the process of learning associated with each, so that both the quality of the institute's activities and the capacity to extend them to ever-growing numbers are constantly rising.[3]

In the institutional meetings held across the world to prepare for the beginning of the current Five Year Plan, the friends benefited from viewing what was happening in each cluster from two perspectives. The first, engaging in three-monthly cycles of activity through which the community grows, with attention to teaching the Faith and conversation with those from the wider society, and, the second, the unfoldment of the three educational imperatives overseen by the training institute. Regarding the latter, the House of Justice has stated the following:

> In this context, one speaks of three educational imperatives, each distinguished by its own methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field. Quite naturally, then, three discussions take shape around the implementation of the programme for the spiritual education of children, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the main sequence of courses.[4]

To help the friends managing the operations of training institutes to respond to current exigencies, this document shares some insights from the body of experience that has accrued in the Bahá'í world about implementing the main sequence of courses, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the programme for the spiritual education of children. The document also addresses matters related to the institutional capacity of training institutes. It is hoped that in each region or country the friends responsible for the institute's endeavours will, taking their particular circumstances and experience into consideration, use these insights to further systematize their efforts.

1. THE MAIN SEQUENCE OF COURSES

As is generally understood, the study of institute courses in a given cluster often starts with only a small group of participants who then begin to offer one or another of the acts of service the courses recommend. For the process of growth to advance meaningfully, the number

of people studying institute courses must continue to rise. The principal issues that lie at the heart of this objective include raising the number and enhancing the capacity of those serving as tutors, sustaining a steady flow of participants through the sequence of courses, and coordinating the institute's efforts through effective mechanisms.

1.1   Raising the Number and Enhancing the Capacity of Tutors

Fundamental to strengthening the educational programmes of the training institute is a steadily increasing number of capable tutors who, over time, are assisted to grow in effectiveness.

1.1.1 The initial cadre of tutors

Institutes face a number of questions with regard to clusters where a programme of growth is nascent, among them: how to meaningfully extend the reach of the study of institute courses to each cluster, and how to ensure that "within a reasonable period, some among those residing in a cluster are enabled to serve as tutors".[5]

Local friends in clusters with new programmes of growth have initially relied on participating in the study of the courses offered by experienced tutors in more advanced clusters nearby or farther afield. They have also benefited from the services of one or two carefully selected and prepared visiting tutors drawn from the strong clusters who in some instances also serve as homefront pioneers for a short or long term. In either case, the tutors involved are most effective when they appreciate that they are promoting a process with far-reaching implications for the spiritual and material life of a population. Besides assisting the first batch of friends to arise and serve, through the courses they offer the tutors help build a strong foundation of understanding and experience on which the institute process is gradually erected.

Yet, it is not until some of the local friends begin serving as tutors that the institute truly takes root in a cluster and the number of those studying institute courses increases significantly. The first steps in this regard may be to encourage a few friends from among those who have studied the early courses and gained some experience with the related activities to begin helping others study the courses. Visiting tutors may begin by calling on these friends to help in leading discussions of sections of the materials and organizing the related practices. They might also delve with them deeper into challenging aspects of the study and practice under way. In this manner, some local friends are carefully enabled to start offering others at least the first two courses of the sequence. An in-depth review of these courses, carried out together with a study of portions of Ruhi Institute Book 7 and the continued aid of an experienced tutor, may further prepare the local friends for this task. As they serve in this manner and progress in their own study of the courses, their capacity to help others who desire to serve grows.

Where this approach is wisely applied, it sets a number of people on the path of learning how to facilitate a process through which the capacity of individuals eager to contribute to intensifying the community-building process is built. Further, by helping larger numbers of people to study institute courses, it provides as early as possible a growing base of participation by the local friends in the related activities. But a word of caution is in order. The desired outcomes are less likely to occur if the process of raising tutors becomes one in which everyone is asked to form a study group the moment he or she finishes one or two courses.   In such instances, great effort may be expended and large numbers briefly obtained, but the results sought of enabling ever more people to promote the community-building process remain elusive.

1.1.2 An expanding body of tutors

When the services of one or two visiting tutors are reinforced by a few local friends who are learning to offer institute courses, this team of five or so individuals makes it possible to expand the number of people studying the courses and initiating activities, thus intensifying the work under way and propelling the cluster on its path of progress to move beyond the second milestone.

Yet, the cluster requires an expanding body of tutors if it is to continue to advance. If in each cluster the number of those capable of serving as tutors is to rise, more people from among those promoting teaching and community-building activities have to keep advancing along the sequence of courses. For it is only when ever-growing contingents are immersed in concurrent and sustained study and service that the body of effective tutors meaningfully expands. This underscores the cumulative character of the capacity-building process engendered by the sequence of courses. With each course studied, knowledge of the Faith increases, insights into spiritual matters deepen, spiritual susceptibilities expand, requisite qualities and attitudes develop, and skills and abilities sharpen. Individuals grow in the ability to investigate the Sacred Writings, to understand the reality of their community, and to engage in conversations of significance. They become better able to consult on their needs, to collaborate with others, and to reflect on and improve their efforts. As they become ever more conscious of the divine assistance surrounding them, they grow in confidence. When such an experience embraces more and more people, and many of them after studying Book 7 are assisted to form a study circle and serve as tutors, they apply all these abilities in efforts to accompany others on the path of service. In this manner, a cluster eventually comes to be served by a score or more local friends capable of acting as tutors. Through their efforts the number of individuals who are enabled to start and sustain core activities and other acts of service in the cluster steadily grows.

1.1.3 Raising the effectiveness of those serving as tutors

In its Riḍván 2010 message, the Universal House of Justice observed that the worldwide Bahá'í community has "succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service", and has "acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality".[6] Within this lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement that can be fostered in local populations, and "much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect".[7] The House of Justice further explained:

> Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated.[8]

Those responsible for overseeing the work of each institute are charged with learning how tutors can become increasingly effective in helping individuals release their potential to contribute to progress within the clusters they serve. In this regard, there are some specific concerns for each institute to address.

Friends who serve as tutors are most effective when they understand well the institute's purpose to raise human resources that are capable of fostering the process of community building through the application of Bahá'í teachings. These friends need to appreciate the nature of the institute process and "the dynamics that underlie it—the spirit of fellowship it creates, the participatory approach it adopts, the depth of understanding it fosters, the acts of service it recommends, and, above all, its reliance on the Word of God".[9] They must become increasingly familiar with how the process enhances capabilities for serving the Cause by integrating study, practice, and service. As the tutors gain experience, they acquire deeper insights into how each institute book builds on the previous ones to empower individuals. They grasp the spiritual qualities each course elicits, the attitudes it promotes, the knowledge it imparts, the skills it endows, the act of service it introduces, and the interactions it fosters.

Ultimately, tutors grow to be capable of facilitating the study of the books in a way that enhances understanding and shapes attitudes, and of organizing the practical components in a manner that builds confidence. When tutors help participants to begin applying, first in the context of the study circle and then in the community, what they are learning, everyone—the tutors included—appreciates better the nature of the unfolding community-building process. Further, tutors promote a spiritually empowering environment and profound friendship among those studying together. They link budding efforts of these friends to the process of community building under way and to the institutions and agencies of the Faith that stand ready to support all those studying institute courses.

Of course, "the capabilities of a tutor develop progressively as an individual enters the field of action and assists others in contributing to the aim of the present series of global Plans".[10] The coordinators of the training institute ensure that those acting as tutors are properly supported by, among other means, promoting mutual support and assistance among the tutors, working alongside them in the field, and gathering them in meetings for reflection.

Mutual support and assistance

Coordinators strive to create in a cluster an atmosphere in which those serving as tutors—new and veteran alike—assist one another in their service. Experienced tutors make themselves available to those taking their initial steps by either offering together with them some of the courses or sharing with them their insights. However, irrespective of the experience of the individuals involved, carrying out activities together in the field and drawing on one another's knowledge serves not only to strengthen abilities but also to deepen commitment.

Working alongside tutors and organizing gatherings for reflection

Coordinators "bring both practical experience and dynamism"[11] to their efforts to work in the field with those serving as tutors. The concrete questions that confront the tutors are many. For instance, they seek to learn about the nature and content of a conversation effective at inviting someone to study Book 1, how to organize the first meeting of a study circle, how to articulate well the aim of the sequence of courses and purpose of each book, and how to keep the discussion of the themes in the course focused and advancing. Many of these questions are answered in the field as the tutors labour together with others and are accompanied by a coordinator or a more experienced colleague.

Such interactions are complemented by regular gatherings of tutors for reflection and for further study of the courses. In these occasions, tutors review relevant materials to deepen their understanding of concepts underlying the institute process and the Plans of the Faith, reflect on the efforts under way, articulate their evolving experience, and examine further the books they are offering. Depending on the number of tutors, these meetings happen at different levels of the community—a village or neighbourhood, a cluster or a number of adjoining clusters, and even a region or a country. Some gatherings involve all the tutors and address matters of general interest; others focus on specific groups, for instance, new tutors, those facilitating a specific course, or those working with a segment of a population, such as youth or women. These occasions are most effective when the consultations of the friends are organized around a set of questions about which they are learning.

1.2   Ensuring a Steady Flow of Participants through the Sequence of Courses

Capacity to sustain a steady flow of people through the institute courses expands as the friends in a cluster learn to engage increasing numbers in conversations on the teachings of the Faith, nurture the participation of youth, manage a growing stream of young people from junior youth groups into the main sequence, and use in a complementary manner study circles and institute campaigns as modes of course delivery.

1.2.1 Fostering conversations on the teachings of the Faith

The capacity to involve growing numbers in the study of institute courses advances along with the ability to foster increasingly rich conversations about the Bahá'í teachings within a population. The sequence of courses itself lends some structure to how these conversations unfold. In its message dated 29 December 2015, the Universal House of Justice stated:

> From the beginning of the sequence of courses, a participant encounters Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in considering such weighty themes as worship, service to humanity, the life of the soul, and the education of children and youth. As a person cultivates the habit of study and deep reflection upon the Creative Word, this process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. These capacities are visible not only in the elevated discussions that increasingly characterize interactions within the community, but in the ongoing conversations that reach well beyond—not least between the Bahá'í youth and their peers— extending to include parents whose daughters and sons are benefiting from the community's programmes of education. Through exchanges of this kind, consciousness of spiritual forces is raised, apparent dichotomies yield to unexpected insights, a sense of unity and common calling is fortified, confidence that a better world can be created is strengthened, and a commitment to action becomes manifest. Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities.[12]

The pattern and quality of the movement of people through the sequence of courses greatly impacts how conversations on the teachings advance in a population. The description that follows, although generalized, will help to illustrate this point.

In a village or neighbourhood where a small group begins to study Book 1, the participants naturally converse on such spiritual matters as the Word of God, prayer, and the life of the soul.

Praying, reading the writings, and taking oneself into account begin to take root among them as a daily discipline. Possibility for exploring together other themes from the writings of the Faith grows when these friends are offered and begin reading the Hidden Words, as recommended in the first unit of Book 1. The reach of this conversation expands when they initiate visits to the homes of their friends and neighbours to share prayers. The introduction of a few devotional meetings provides a space where more people, Bahá'í or not, gather to pray and reflect on the implications of the Writings for their individual and collective life. This seemingly simple advance becomes a means for inviting to the study of institute courses those who show receptivity, leading to an increase in people entering the path of service.

When some among those who have completed Book 1 come to study Book 2, the themes and concepts on which they deliberate with others broaden to include, for example, the eternal Covenant, unity in the community, Bahá'í principles relating to various social teachings, and others that arise as the friends learn to respond to the needs of the hearer. The homes they visit in this connection become additional venues for profound conversations. Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the spiritual instruction of children—and on the part individuals, families, and the community play in this regard—begin to be considered as some study Book 3 and a few children's classes are formed. Even a simple event convened with some regularity for families and neighbours to find out what the children are learning elevates discussion on the meaning and implication of a community nurturing its children spiritually.

When some people study Book 4, the conversations begin to touch more deeply on the Persons of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb and on the interplay between crisis and victory that Their noble lives illustrate. The study of Book 5 fuels exchanges on Bahá'í teachings relating to spiritually empowering the junior youth, which, given the societal forces assailing this age group, resonate with youth, parents, and community leaders. The study of Book 6 fosters the capacity to engage in "a conversation between two souls"[13]—a direct teaching effort that "can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation".[14]

Thus, each course studied assists in enabling an expanding number of friends to express their "understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance".[15] In this way, a village or a neighbourhood is gradually suffused with discussions founded on the teachings of the Faith and on the emerging experience in applying them to creating a new pattern of collective life. With the range of possible conversations, and "as experience grows, the friends become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause".[16]

The manner in which this capacity to engage a population in conversations on the teachings is further systematized is described in the following statement of the Universal House of Justice:

> As progress continues, the rising capacity for meaningful conversation is harnessed in the plans of the institutions. By the time cycles of activity have formally emerged, this capacity is being further stimulated through the expansion phase that does so much to determine the outcome of each cycle. The precise objectives of each expansion phase vary, of course, depending on conditions in the cluster and the circumstances of the Bahá'í community. In some instances, its main aim is to increase participation in the core activities; in others, readiness to enrol in the Faith is discovered. Conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and the purpose of His mission occur in a variety of settings, including firesides and visits to homes.[17]

Besides portraying how the sequence of courses gives shape to the unfolding of meaningful conversations on the teachings of the Faith in a population, what the description above seeks to show is how the reach, depth, and coherence of these conversations, on the one hand, and the increase in the number of people studying institute courses, on the other, fuel each other.

1.2.2 Learning to nurture the participation of youth in institute courses

It is clear from the foregoing that much of the progress of a cluster depends on the ability of the friends to engage a population in diverse and weighty conversations on the Bahá'í teachings and then to draw its members into an educational process that multiplies their powers to contribute to the building of a new society. It is natural, then, that at any point in this process the friends would encounter certain particularly receptive segments of that population. As the House of Justice has stated, the youth represent "a most responsive element of every receptive population to which the friends have sought to reach out".[18] Initial endeavours to open a particular channel for the entry of youth into the sequence of courses in a cluster are necessarily modest. Effort is made—sometimes through specially organized gatherings—to reach out to a group of youth, engage them in discussions that open before their eyes "a compelling vision of how they can contribute to building a new world",[19] invite them to study the institute courses, and then assist them to move swiftly into the arena of service. Often this involves the intensive study of a set of courses such as Book 1, 3, and 5, since the acts of service to which they are first introduced are usually teaching children's classes and helping groups of junior youth. As the process of growth advances, the manner in which the young people study institute courses gradually comes to conform for the most part to the sequence in which the courses are arranged. The institute might, however, from time to time offer some youth a selected number of courses in order to accelerate the multiplication of activities.

1.2.3 A flow from junior youth groups into the main sequence

Another channel opens up as more and more of those in the junior youth groups turn 15 years old and are assisted to begin studying institute courses. Early in the process of growth a cluster may experience entry into the main sequence by a few such young people. The first noticeable flow from the groups might, however, occur only after the first three or so years of offering the programme. Even then it might be quite modest. Only when capacity to sustain large numbers of junior youth in stable groups is present in a cluster does an appreciable flow happen.

To embrace the young people from the groups into institute courses, the agencies gradually learn to track the progression of cohorts of junior youth through the texts; to help them see, as they near the completion of the programme or the age of 15, the prospects for further study and service that await them; to organize formal events to welcome them as individuals or as groups into the main sequence; and to prepare the tutors, who, in some cases, may be the same friends who accompanied them as animators, to work well with them. While the young people "represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization"[20] and they can do much to boost the efforts in a cluster, expectations of how fast they can advance need to remain reasonable. Rushing them through the sequence for the sole purpose of increasing one activity or another might in the long term prove counterproductive. It would be best for them to advance along the sequence of courses at a natural pace.

1.2.4 Progression along the sequence of courses

In its message dated 12 December 2011 to all National Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of Justice stated the following:

> The main sequence of courses is organized so as to set the individual, whether Bahá'í or not, on a path being defined by the accumulating experience of the community in its endeavour to open before humanity the vision of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. The very notion of a path is, itself, indicative of the nature and purpose of the courses, for a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores; it belongs to the community.[21]

In this light, to raise more and more human resources in each cluster, "an increasing number of friends are recruited to enter the first basic course, and relatively significant percentages are then helped to reach higher and higher courses, acquiring thereby the needed capabilities of service".[22] If only a small fraction of those who have studied the first course advance to the second one, and another small fraction of these friends advance to the third course, and so on, the work of the institute and ultimately the process of growth itself are robbed of the required dynamism.

Progress of many people through the sequence of courses is more likely to occur when the friends are able to associate their studies to specific action. They are eager to study the next course in the sequence when they understand that moving together along a path of service enables them to contribute to the advancement of their community. Such progress may be impeded when the courses are inadvertently presented as an end in themselves or as a mere deepening, when the pace of study is too slow or too fast, when deliberations on concepts are not associated with experience, or when the practical components of the courses are neglected.

To ensure that the number of those proceeding along the sequence is substantial, institute coordinators, often with other agencies in the cluster, meet periodically to review the flow of participants from one book to the next. To determine when undue lag in the progression of many friends has occurred and what its causes may be, they rely on accurate information about participation in the courses. On the basis of a sound analysis, the institute may introduce measures—such as discussions with the friends, well-timed institute campaigns, and the assistance of visiting tutors—to remove obstacles standing in the way of the continued participation of many people.

1.2.5 The delivery of institute courses

In most clusters worldwide, study circles remain the predominant mode of delivering institute courses. In a cluster with a nascent programme of growth, the first study circles are usually formed by visiting tutors or a homefront pioneer. As the number of local friends who can act as tutors grows, the capacity to establish study circles necessarily increases. Apart from helping growing numbers to arise and serve, well-functioning study circles foster among the friends and between them and the institutions loving and mutually supportive interactions that bind these protagonists of the Plan together in unified action.

Study circles derive much of their effectiveness from the fact that they each constitute a small group of friends who study the courses together in a local setting with the explicit purpose of learning to apply Bahá'í teachings to their personal and collective life and to thus contribute to a profound process of change. In an environment marked by sincere friendship and common purpose, the members study the institute courses, engage in service and extracurricular activities, and promote this mode of learning to others. As more and more friends serve as tutors, various segments of a community's inhabitants—youth, women, mothers, couples, young professionals, and families—come to be accommodated in the study of the courses and to play a part in efforts to promote spiritual and material well-being. The study circles become distinct features of the life of the community when they operate with a measure of formality, incorporating elements such as a formal beginning and ending, a certain membership, and a defined schedule. Also, diverse and expanding numbers of the friends progress along the sequence of courses when a degree of flexibility is allowed—the members, for instance, adjust as needed the pace at which they perform the various activities, and while some of them may leave when a particular course concludes, others might join as the study of a new one commences. To ensure that the study of any particular course is not overly prolonged, the friends might complement regular study with occasions for intensive study that might last a weekend or a few days. When they have a healthy rhythm of progress, study circles do much to invigorate programmes of growth.

In order to accelerate the flow of large numbers of friends along the sequence of courses, study circles usually operate alongside institute campaigns. In clusters where there is great receptivity, campaigns might for a while even be the main mode of course delivery. Involving the intensive study of two or more institute courses over a relatively short time, institute campaigns are held at all levels of the community—local, cluster or group of clusters, regional, or national. The institutions and friends of the locality where the campaign is held are often involved in planning and providing resources, and the campaigns are most effective when they are scheduled during times of the year when many people can participate. A team of tutors—some perhaps drawn from other communities or clusters—may be tasked with implementing the campaign; these friends are required to give creative thought to carrying out the practical components and accompanying the participants to initiate or extend their acts of service. When offered in a locality, campaigns not only increase a community's human resources within a short period but also raise local capacity to support institute activities and invigorate the work of teaching and consolidation through the practice and service activities of the participants.

For the agencies in a cluster, having a record of all study circles and institute campaigns helps them to draw on the participants for the tasks of teaching, consolidation, and community building. Occasionally, the agencies might gather all those studying institute courses to reflect with them on their studies and services, to nurture their commitment, and to help them integrate into the life of the community. As for the training institute, its responsibility is to design, based on local circumstances, an approach to course delivery that coherently combines study circles and institute campaigns so that capacity to enable ever-larger numbers of people to progress along the sequence of courses can continue to grow and become manifest in an increasingly vibrant process of community building.

1.3   Coordination of the Main Sequence of Courses

The efficacy of the training institute depends largely on there being at every point as a cluster advances an effective arrangement for supporting the tutors, visiting or local. When a programme of growth is still nascent, support might come from a homefront pioneer, a veteran

tutor or a coordinator from a nearby cluster, an Auxiliary Board member or an assistant, or a regional or national coordinator. As more local friends begin serving as tutors, the most experienced among them complement such external assistance by beginning to help others. Often, after a cluster has passed the second milestone, the number of local tutors begins to notably increase and a local coordinator is named from among the tutors most willing to assist others in their services. In his or her efforts to accompany the tutors, such a coordinator might continue to benefit, on the one hand, from the support of a more experienced colleague from an advanced cluster or a regional or national coordinator, and, on the other hand, from the assistance of capable local tutors with whom he or she collaborates. In a cluster that has passed the third milestone, in which the number of tutors grows even larger, an additional coordinator or two for the main sequence may be named from among the collaborators. It is, however, unreasonable to expect that, as a cluster progresses further, "capacity would be built by simply assigning more and more coordinators"[23] to it. Strengthening mutual support and assistance among the tutors guarantees that each of them is always adequately supported.

Irrespective of the scope of the community-building process in a cluster and the arrangements in place to support the tutors, the concerns that shape the endeavours of the coordinators are mostly the same. In general, they ensure that the number of those acting as tutors rises and capacity among them to offer the full range of institute courses advances. They pay special attention to promoting the study of Book 7, help tutors to form study circles, and aid them to learn to facilitate effectively the study of the courses and the implementation of the practical components. New tutors especially require help inviting people to study the institute courses and enabling the participants to grasp the purpose and workings of a study circle. They often also benefit from receiving assistance in facilitating the first few sections of whatever course they are offering. Through such support, the tutors come to appreciate that individuals persist in their studies when they see themselves growing in understanding, enhancing their capabilities for service, and engaging in spiritually enriching interactions. To help the tutors foster such conditions in their study circles, coordinators, as stated earlier, cultivate loving collaboration among the tutors, labour alongside them in the field, and gather them in meetings for reflection.

Depending on the circumstances on the ground, any one of the coordinators of the three educational imperatives—the main sequence of courses, the junior youth programme, and the programme for spiritual education of children—might be named first. Initially he or she might also follow the other activities until other coordinators emerge. And when all are in place, they learn to complement one another and to periodically "examine together the strength of the educational process as a whole".[24] In collaborating with members of the Area Teaching Committee and with the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, coordinators—whether there is one or several—contribute to assessing the progress of the community-building process and ensuring that the activities in the cluster advance coherently. When, for instance, the Area Teaching Committee promotes during each cycle a wide range of conversations on the teachings, the number of people beginning to study the courses can be expected to rise. Equally, when the coordinator for the main sequence keeps the Committee informed of all the study circles and institute campaigns occurring, the Committee can draw on the participants to advance the teaching work.

At the regional or national level, coordinators for the main sequence of courses ensure that for each cluster there is an arrangement for supporting the tutors and that this arrangement is not only effective but also adapts and expands in response to growth. In this light, they ensure the timely appointment of cluster coordinators. By working together with the cluster

coordinators in the field and bringing them together in reflection meetings, they help these friends continue to grow in their capacity to support the tutors. Appreciating the need for all coordinators at the cluster level to benefit from what is being learned across the region or country, the coordinators organize interactions among cluster coordinators that often involve visits to clusters where relevant experience is being generated. For a small region or country, one coordinator may be sufficient. For a larger one, two or more are needed over time and each may be assigned to a part of the region or country. As is the case at the cluster level, regional or national coordinators of the main sequence also work closely with the coordinators for the junior youth programme and the programme for the spiritual education of children while also collaborating with the Regional Bahá'í Council, if one exists, and the Auxiliary Board members. Furthermore, they play a critical part in regional or national consultative and planning processes.

2. THE JUNIOR YOUTH SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME

When in its message dated 27 December 2005 the Universal House of Justice urged all National Spiritual Assemblies to "consider the junior youth groups formed through programmes implemented by their training institutes a fourth core activity in its own right",[25] further impetus was given to the expansion of this vital educational imperative. The progress made since then has been impressive. Training institutes in almost all national Bahá'í communities worldwide are now implementing the programme, albeit at varying levels of quantitative and qualitative development. Globally, over 550,000 young people have already studied at least the first text of the programme. Those currently engaged exceed 150,000 in more than 17,000 groups. Thousands of youth, who find in the junior youth programme "an ideal arena in which to assist those younger than themselves to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them",[26] are serving as animators of the groups, and hundreds of them as coordinators or assistants to coordinators. Although the expansion has been more remarkable in some parts of the world than in others, junior youth groups have generally found fertile soil across a range of social realities—from small villages to the neighbourhoods of large metropolitan cities. More than 2,600 clusters with a programme of growth have at least one junior youth group, and some 70 have 30 or more groups, with 300 or more participants.

Notwithstanding the progress made, the capacity to offer the programme in cluster after cluster has to grow further. Two broad realities are apparent in this regard: clusters where the friends are striving to establish an intensive programme of growth, where the junior youth programme may be in its early stages; and clusters where the friends are labouring to embrace large numbers, where some basic capacity is present on which the friends are building.

2.1   Clusters Where the Friends are Establishing an Intensive Programme of Growth

The knowledge garnered from efforts around the world makes it possible to visualize with greater clarity the path of progress of the junior youth programme in a cluster. Institutes now have to apply the available understanding in endeavours to firmly establish junior youth groups in all clusters with a programme of growth. Whether the initial efforts start with young people from Bahá'í families or those drawn from the wider community, what needs to be achieved in such clusters may be conceived as helping the local friends develop the basic capacity required to establish the programme on a sound enough foundation upon which it can grow to edify hundreds of junior youth and invigorate whole communities. This is no easy task.

Numerically, it often involves engaging and sustaining some 50 to 100 junior youth in about 5 to 10 groups, a capacity that is currently present in some 600 clusters worldwide.

Experience indicates that there are several dimensions to the requisite capacity. Principally, there emerges in each cluster a growing cadre of friends dedicated to the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. The growth of the programme is greatly facilitated when these friends, however few they may be, learn to read accurately the reality of their community and to identify local factors that might propel the programme or curtail its progress. The friends become increasingly capable of conversing with the community on the empowerment of the junior youth, a conversation that draws primarily on the teachings of the Faith about this age group, most of which is clearly articulated in Book 5 of the sequence of courses. This conversation also provides opportunity to reflect on certain elements of the culture of the population that are conducive or contrary to the spiritual empowerment of young people. Noteworthy too is engaging ever-growing numbers of youth in systematic conversations on "the contribution they can make to the improvement of their society"[27] and on "providing for the needs of others, particularly for younger generations".[28] Inviting the youth to study institute courses is an essential aspect that is fostered from the very start, and this is only possible when capable tutors of Book 5, whether visiting or local, are available to each cluster. The study of that course is most effective when in determining how to offer it, the conditions of the youth and their experience are taken into account.

Once a few groups are formed, sustaining them depends on how the animators are accompanied to learn to facilitate effectively the study of the junior youth texts and to complement it with artistic activities, social interaction, and service projects. Pairing them with experienced animators when possible, gathering them in periodic meetings to review the texts, enabling them to learn from others more experienced, bringing them together in occasions to study the institute courses and the junior youth texts are all proved to be effective ways in which they can be supported. If animators are to grow in capacity to not just help junior youth but also contribute in various ways to bettering their communities, they gradually have to be assisted to appreciate the full extent of the community-building process unfolding locally and the context within which the junior youth programme is unfolding.

Helping more and more youth to serve as animators contributes both to an increase in the number of groups and to the stability and resilience of the programme. With more trained animators, those that leave can be more easily replaced, and if one animator is unable to facilitate the study of a particular text, an experienced colleague steps in. When the junior youth in the groups functioning in a village or neighbourhood, or even in a cluster, are seen as enrolled into one educational system and their animators as collaborators in supporting all of them, occasions for coming together to study some of the texts in camps or to implement service projects together become a more pronounced feature of the programme in a cluster.

The programme is strengthened when those overseeing it in a cluster have explicit and reasonable expectations of what can be accomplished over the course of a year. Currently nine texts are available to the junior youth. While it is at present anticipated that the junior youth will go through at least three texts in the first year, establishing a rhythm of study that guarantees such progress sometimes proves difficult. This challenge is best met when the way in which the programme is implemented takes into account the circumstances of the young people—both junior youth and youth—in the community, the various activities in which they are engaged at school and at home, the general pattern of life of their community, and the periods during the year of intense and of relaxed activity. Such understanding sets the stage for how in a cluster

the junior youth will proceed through the texts during a year—when, for instance, they will study at a regular pace in their groups and when they will all be brought together in camps for intensive study and service.

Yet another aspect of capacity to establish a sound and steadily expanding programme in a cluster is the involvement of the parents and the entire community. The conversations that occur as a group is formed and continue throughout its life help to build unity of vision, thought, and action. Occasions when the parents meet and the community gathers to reflect on the progress and efforts of the junior youth both extend this conversation and inject into the programme the necessary vitality. When they consult, the parents and the animators explore together the programme's underlying concepts, efforts to promote junior youth groups in the community and with other families, ways to acquire the essential materials, and means to mobilize resources for camps and other collective endeavours.

As each cluster moves towards the second milestone and beyond, training institutes everywhere will focus on building the capacity to raise the junior youth programme to this basic level. To assist them in this regard, the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre has captured the knowledge and insights thus far generated in a document titled "Developing the capacity to engage 50 to 100 participants in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme". The remarks above summarize some of the document's contents. It is hoped that it will be studied by all the friends promoting the programme at the national, regional, and cluster levels.

2.2   Clusters Where the Friends are Learning to Embrace Large Numbers

In all clusters where the capacity described above is present, the friends are now striving to cultivate further the associated interrelated abilities. They are enhancing capacity to engage at least a few hundred junior youth in tens of groups, reaching in this regard some 300 junior youth in about 30 or so groups. One question before them in this connection is how to increase capacity to raise growing numbers of animators in neighbourhoods and villages that are becoming centres of intense activity, some of which may be ripe for enlisting in the groups the majority, if not all, of the local junior youth. Earlier in the cluster's development, one or two tutors of Book 5 may have sufficed to raise the initial cohort of animators. At this point, more of such tutors are required if growing numbers of youth, and beyond them parents and members of local institutions, are to study the course. Attention to the quality of the junior youth groups also becomes more pronounced. Animators are closely accompanied to learn how to consciously help the junior youth enhance the power of their expression, the acuity of their perception, and the depth of their interaction. Ongoing and creative thought is given to service projects initiated by the groups. By drawing other members of the community into these projects, those initiatives showing great promise are sustained over longer periods. With such progress, the junior youth programme attracts the support of many of the local people and leaders who lend a hand through several means. Additionally, opportunities to form junior youth groups in other settings such as schools and community centres arise over time. In these various ways every aspect of the learning experience in which the young people are immersed comes to impact markedly their life and that of the community in general.

Besides accompanying them in their service, youth serving as animators are supported in other ways as well. In the context of their service to the Faith and the community, they are, for instance, encouraged in their formal education and assisted to think about the prospects for tertiary training and for career development before them. During reflection gatherings,

animators deliberate also on such matters and on other noble aspirations. In this they receive the aid of not only the institute coordinators but also other institutions and agencies of the Faith, such as Auxiliary Board members and Local Spiritual Assemblies.

In a community where the programme has reached such a level of quantitative and qualitative progress, rich conversations on the moral and intellectual well-being of young people proliferate. These conversations take place in the homes and during occasions such as devotional gatherings, community meetings, and institutional conferences. They also become a feature of the expansion phase of the cycle of activities. Gradually, the programme's fundamental concepts, aims, and objectives come to be expressed through other means of communication, for instance, drama, music, or film. Where the programme is operating at this level, large numbers of animators are sustaining their efforts from year to year and progressively more youngsters are continuing in the groups for the programme's three-year duration. A growing number of them are beginning to enter the main sequence of courses and to offer acts of service.

As has been mentioned, there are about 70 clusters worldwide where the programme is reaching this level of development and the friends are involving more than 300 junior youth in the groups. In some of these clusters the number of participants even exceeds 1,000. Achieving the progress described above in several hundred more clusters where the friends are learning to embrace large numbers is an important aspect of the current Plan. The part to be played by learning sites in this regard is critical, for they ensure that the process of learning associated with each further stage of the programme's growth is effectively extended and systematized in the clusters with which they are associated. And as capacity exists, they collaborate with training institutes to carry the work to other advanced clusters.

2.3   Coordination of Junior Youth Groups

All of these efforts depend on there being at every point in the programme's advance a scheme for accompanying animators that matches the need. As the groups multiply and become more established, the organizational scheme in place evolves in complexity. In the early stages, the support of an experienced individual from a cluster close by may be adequate. This is soon supplemented by animators working in teams and the assistance of the more experienced among them. Eventually one or more coordinators are named from among the local animators. As they take on their responsibilities they learn from veteran coordinators in more advanced clusters and collaborate closely with the cluster coordinator of the main sequence and of children's classes, if and when they are in place.

At the regional or national level, a coordinator is named usually from among the most experienced cluster coordinators. As the number of junior youth groups increase across the region or country, an additional coordinator or two is named. The regional or national coordinators work with the cluster coordinators in the field and bring them together in meetings of reflection. Capacity to support the programme advances greatly when a team emerges at the regional or national level composed of the coordinators and other experienced individuals who, in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members, have a clear vision of the growth of the programme across the entire region or country. As is the case at the cluster level, close collaboration with the coordinators of the main sequence and the children's education programme is an important aspect of the mode of operation at the regional or national level.

Further, for capacity to grow, the institute and the learning site, where one is in place, foster a dynamic collaboration. The regional or national coordinators and the resource persons work together in the field and, through such spaces as learning site seminars and institute gatherings, learn from one another. The knowledge and experience that emerge from the network of clusters associated with a learning site is transferred to the training institute, and the insights generated by the training institute in further extending the reach of the programme is shared with the learning sites.

3. THE PROGRAMME FOR THE SPIRITUAL EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

As the Universal House of Justice has stated, "concern for the spiritual education of children has long been an element of the culture of the Bahá'í community".[29] Over the last Plan, the number of children participating in the classes expanded significantly, reaching over 210,000 globally. The growing capacities of institutes to train teachers and assist them to form classes, and the expanding mechanisms to support their service and progress, are among the factors that have contributed to such growth. Fundamentally, however, it is the mounting dedication of individuals and institutions—indeed of the community as a whole—to nurturing and empowering spiritually its young members that has provided the primary impetus. This is evident in the fact that the number of children's classes has increased most in clusters where junior youth groups have also steadily multiplied.

The current Plan's objective of intensifying further the community-building process in 5,000 clusters worldwide calls for marked development of the capacity to spiritually educate children. Some of the particular demands in this regard relate to clusters where the friends are striving to establish an intensive programme of growth. In most of these clusters, experience with children's classes remains largely rudimentary. Other demands are associated with those clusters where the friends are learning to embrace large numbers, where most children's classes are currently found.

3.1   Clusters Where the Friends are Establishing an Intensive Programme of Growth

In clusters where the experience of the friends with children's classes is in its initial stages, a principal need is establishing a few classes by building organically on whatever activities are present. From among those engaged in the core activities and the conversations under way, a few who show interest in teaching children are trained as teachers and assisted to form the first two or three classes.

In each cluster with a few classes, a small team of teachers is learning how to offer, lesson after lesson, the first grade, often to children of varying ages. Much more is happening, however. A conversation on "the value of Bahá'í education and of a proper spiritual upbringing"[30] is being set in motion; the parents and teachers are establishing a collaborative relationship; and the classes themselves are becoming a means to inspiring other people in the community who are inclined to this area of service. Further, a team of friends who over time might assume various duties related to promoting children's classes is emerging from among the teachers, the parents, and others.

As the classes grow in both quantity and quality, the institute strengthens its capacity to train ever-growing numbers of teachers and to help them learn to teach grade after grade.

A basic organizational scheme is gradually built, and a pattern of collaboration among the teachers, parents, and institutions is progressively put in place.

3.1.1 Raising the first contingent of teachers

Initial efforts to increase the number of friends teaching children include raising tutors in a country or region who are capable of facilitating effectively the study of Book 3 of the sequence of courses. Initially most of such individuals are drawn from among the experienced teachers and tutors in the more advanced clusters. When they learn to offer Book 3 in a manner that raises the understanding of the participants, enhances their commitment to the education of children, and sharpens their skills and abilities, the spiritual education of children is established on a strong footing.

Although the first teachers in a cluster may come from any segment of the population, young mothers and youth—both boys and girls—tend to be the first to respond. Mothers bring to the effort their experience of parenting and more readily engage other parents in related conversations. As for the youth, when they are involved in deep discussions on their responsibility to the community, they respond especially well when invited to work with children and junior youth. Building a team of a few mothers and youth who collaborate to teach the first few classes should be a possibility within the reach of every cluster.

Regarding the training, it is, of course, envisioned that those teaching children would need to have studied at least the first three courses of the sequence. All the qualities and abilities treated in these three courses, among them developing spiritual identity and habits, engaging in systematic conversations, and teaching a simple class of children, are relevant to a children's class teacher. Nevertheless, some flexibility in how individuals proceed through these courses is often necessary in the early stages. Friends interested in teaching children have sometimes studied the first and third courses, formed classes, and then proceeded to study the second and other courses. In some instances, forming children's classes is integrated into the study of Book 3, so that by the time the teachers finish the course some classes have already begun. Whatever approach is initially adopted depends on the experience and circumstances of the people involved, and the support available.

3.1.2 Operation of the classes

At an early stage, the main issues pertaining to the operation of children's classes include helping the teachers learn to hold the classes with increasing regularity, become adept at handling the various components of the lessons in the first grade, and strengthen relationships with parents. In this regard, the teachers meet often to review the lessons, explore their principle spiritual objectives, share experiences, and determine how to assist one another. To continue to grow in capacity, the teachers persist in their study of institute courses. As relevant experience accrues, the teachers' commitment to spiritually educating children strengthens, and so does that of the parents and the community in general. This enables a community to sustain the initial classes established.

The teachers' ability to collaborate with parents is another pertinent issue at this initial stage. Teachers learn to periodically visit parents in their homes to acquaint them with the progress being made and to elicit whatever assistance is necessary. Efforts to enhance this vital relationship are seamlessly integrated into the various activities associated with implementing the programme. For instance, teachers and parents study or review segments of Book 3 together,

and parents occasionally join the teachers when they come together for reflection. The teachers and parents are, as a result, increasingly engaged in a conversation that nurtures among them a deep sense of solidarity. This conversation is gradually extended within the community, fostering friendship among the families and interactions in various spaces, including devotional meetings, that serve to attract the hearts of both children and parents to Bahá'u'lláh.

3.2   Clusters Where the Friends are Learning to Embrace Large Numbers

In advanced clusters, institutes are building on the capacities so far developed in order to increase significantly the number of children receiving spiritual education and to organize them in a systematic programme. The training of teachers is being further augmented; the teachers are learning to offer the first three grades and higher, as they become available; and the classes are becoming more formalized. Further, a pattern of coordination able to accompany steadily expanding numbers of teachers in neighbourhoods and villages is emerging. The development of children's classes in these contexts is contributing notably to the community-building process.

3.2.1 The training of teachers and progression of children from grade to grade

Children's classes multiply significantly as the number of people advancing through the sequence of courses grows and some among them join the initial group of teachers in spiritually educating more and more children. This is especially the case in clusters where the friends are able to engage growing numbers of youth in meaningful conversations and assist them to study institute courses.

As the teachers learn to organize Grade 1 classes, they continue to advance along the main sequence of courses. At the same time, they are assisted to study the branch courses of Book 3 that prepare them to offer the subsequent grades of the classes for which materials are currently available. The qualities, skills, and abilities of the teachers sharpen further as they are brought together periodically in reflection gatherings.

The experience acquired from teaching the classes week after week, and the understanding obtained from participating with others in gatherings for reflection, enable the teachers to appreciate even further the special nature of the service they are rendering. Their relationship with the parents of the children grows stronger as they interact with them more regularly, whether through home visits, special consultative meetings, or reflection gatherings. In addition, their ability to contribute to the community-building process under way advances meaningfully when they play a part in various gatherings where the community consults, reflects, and plans. All these factors combine to strengthen the teachers' dedication to the programme's objectives, sharpen their vision of its development, and consolidate their resolve to sustain their efforts from year to year.

3.2.2 Further formalization of the classes

Growth in the number of children receiving spiritual education necessitates more formalization of the classes. Organizing the children into age-based classes, outlining an annual schedule, and convening special events, such as children's festivals, are among some elements of a formal system that receive due attention. While previously the classes may have included children of different ages, classes for distinct age groups are formed as more teachers become available within the locality. An annual calendar that is consistent with the pattern of life of the population is established detailing when during a year the classes generally

commence, when they take a break, and when they close, even as arrangements are made to accommodate new classes forming at any time during the year. The calendar might also include dates for reflection gatherings of teachers and other cluster events that require the participation of teachers and children. Certain formal meetings are held at particular points during the year involving teachers, children and their families, members of the institutions, and other interested individuals in the community. What the children are accomplishing is shared with those present, the efforts of both the children and teachers are acknowledged, and as the children and teachers move from one grade to the next, some recognition of this achievement is made. Further, as the children advance through the classes, those turning 12 are welcomed into the junior youth programme.

3.3   Coordination of Children's Classes

During the early stages of the programme's development, teachers, however few they may be, learn to function as a team that meets regularly. The meetings of the team might initially be spearheaded by the most experienced among them. Sometimes regional institutes have assigned to each cluster a veteran teacher or a coordinator from an advanced cluster, or the Auxiliary Board member might designate a capable assistant, to visit the teachers regularly and accompany them in their efforts. Dedication mounts among the teachers when they are enabled to interact with a larger body of their colleagues through gatherings hosted in more advanced clusters nearby.

As the number of teachers grows and their experience deepens, one among them who has demonstrated capacity to help others is formally designated as coordinator. Such an individual might, of course, continue to receive assistance from an experienced coordinator from another cluster as he or she assumes more formally the tasks of supporting others.

The continued multiplication of the classes in clusters in which the friends are learning to embrace large numbers in the community-building process places increasing demands on the system of coordination. Here, the ability of teachers to work in teams requires continued strengthening, as does the ability of experienced teachers to help new teachers or those starting to teach a new grade. While one coordinator, perhaps working with a small team of collaborators, can support 10 to 15 teachers, an additional coordinator is often required as the number of classes expands further. In any case, an organizational scheme emerges over time in an advanced cluster which accommodates teams of collaborating teachers, experienced teachers that help the coordinators support others, and a number of coordinators that ensure that the classes are being sustained, the teachers are growing in capacity, and the families and the entire community are appropriately engaged.

At the regional or national level, the major concern is, of course, ensuring that the friends in each cluster are supported so that, whatever the cluster's stage of development, children's classes increase in both number and effectiveness. Raising tutors of Book 3 and ensuring that they are available to all clusters is, as demonstrated, an indispensable aspect of the support provided. Making certain that each cluster is served by some organizational scheme, including drawing on coordinators and experienced individuals from other clusters as needed, is another. As coordinators emerge in cluster after cluster, those serving at the regional or national level assist them in the field and bring them together in reflection gatherings that address questions relevant to the stage of development of the children's classes in their cluster. All materials in sufficient quantities and appropriate languages are provided to the teachers and children at all ages. Careful attention to the flow of knowledge from advanced clusters where a greater range

of experience is being generated makes it possible for other clusters to benefit and advance expeditiously. And, as is the case with the main sequence of courses and the junior youth programme, over time a team emerges at the regional or national level composed of the coordinators and other experienced individuals who, in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members, grow in capacity to follow the development of the programme.

4. INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

The progress of each and all of the institute's programmes ultimately depends on the strength of the institute as an agency of the Faith operating at the level of a country or region. There are currently over 300 training institutes worldwide, which range in scope from those in small countries with a handful of clusters with a programme of growth to those in large regions where the number of such clusters might exceed 100. In all but a few cases, these institutes operate under a board of directors. Although in general all boards bear the same responsibilities, their particular operations vary depending on the range of the institute's work. At any rate, it is vital that members of a board, national or regional coordinators, Auxiliary Board members, and a cadre of believers with the relevant experience learn to collaborate effectively in supporting the institute's various responsibilities.

Irrespective of the scope of the work of the institute, the board and those with whom it closely collaborates in a region or country strive to enhance a number of related institutional capacities. They endeavour to formulate a clear vision of the progress of the educational processes, foster capacity to learn systematically and to disseminate the accruing knowledge, and support a healthy evolution of the institute's organizational schemes at the cluster and regional levels. They also labour to raise capable human resources for the institute's various purposes, manage effectively financial and material resources, and address pertinent administrative concerns, especially in relation to institute staff and statistics. The complexity of each of these issues naturally grows as the community-building process advances in an increasing number of clusters across a region.

4.1   Formulating a Vision

Guidance to foster the growth of the Faith at its current stage of development is, of course, provided in the messages of the Universal House of Justice. As the friends study the guidance, read the reality of their country or region, and reflect on their experience, they are able to formulate a vision centred on advancing the two essential movements at the heart of the process of growth: the steady flow of individuals through the sequence of courses offered by the training institute and the movement of clusters along a continuum of development. In the context of this general vision for the country or region, the institute articulates its own particular vision for the spiritual education of the friends for the duration of the Plan. This might involve not only what is possible to accomplish in each cluster with regard to the three educational imperatives but also the main strategies and approaches to be pursued. The institute then formulates annually a plan and budget, and every cycle an operational plan. Where capacity for such methodical planning is well developed, the work of the institute is characterized by clarity of thought and systematic action. Its lines of action are well-defined, and the deliberations among the friends at the forefront of its operations are both practical and far-sighted.

4.2   Learning and the Ability to Disseminate the Accruing Knowledge

The members of the institute board collaborate with the coordinators, the Auxiliary Board members, and other experienced individuals in "a systematic and concentrated effort … to gather and apply insights emerging from the grassroots regarding the promotion of children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles".[31] On their part, regional or national coordinators labour in the field together with cluster coordinators, converse with them on their experiences, and observe first hand the emerging strengths and challenges. Regular reflection gatherings that are informed by what is happening at the grassroots allow for a deep exploration of the unfolding experience in the region or country. The deliberations and endeavours of coordinators might for a period of time concentrate on particular sets of questions that are critical to achieving continued progress. The insights obtained from such focused efforts are then appropriately analysed and shared with others. A cluster in which significant experience is gained may in this regard be used to host gatherings of coordinators from other clusters and dispatch experienced individuals to other clusters to work with local friends in the field. This is an approach to disseminating learning that has worked well with learning sites for the junior youth programme, and it is now being applied in some form in the context of groups of adjoining clusters that are organized around one or more which can offer "a valuable source of knowledge and experience and represent a reservoir of human resources".[32] Further, some institutes are also capturing lessons learned by creating documents that serve as dynamic records of efforts to address some key questions. With some of the knowledge generated globally about learning as a mode of operation now presented in Book 10, it is hoped that the study of that course will help training institutes themselves achieve even more notable advances in this capacity.

4.3   The Evolution of Organizational Schemes

Those overseeing the work of the institute in a country or region gradually grow in their understanding of how organizational schemes emerge and evolve as a cluster advances. The overriding concern, of course, is ensuring that at every stage, a cluster is served by an appropriate arrangement and that capacity for coordination keeps pace with growth in activity. This requires that there is at the regional or national level "an acute awareness of circumstances on the ground",[33] the basis upon which decisions with regard to coordination are then made. In some clusters, an experienced person from another cluster is assigned to assist the friends. In others, a few local friends who are showing capacity to assist are accompanying those who have initiated core activities. In still others, coordinators are formally named, while eventually, multiple coordinators working in teams, each with a few collaborators, are raised. A regular review of the organizational arrangements in clusters and groups of clusters across the country or region, and of the mechanisms in place to provide the necessary support, is an essential aspect of the responsibilities borne at the national or regional level.

Structures at the national or regional level evolve to attend to these organizational needs of clusters. Periodic assessment should help those overseeing the institute's work to determine in a timely manner when to reinforce or adjust whatever arrangement is in place. When to name a regional or national coordinator for each of the three educational activities; when, as activity increases, to appoint additional ones from among those gaining experience in clusters; how to build teams of friends at the regional level to help follow each programme; when to assign coordinators to work in parts of the region—are all matters that are progressively addressed. The latter point requires an additional comment. In large regions where regional coordinators are assigned to follow a number of clusters or even groups of adjoining clusters, they are increasingly operating at the level of a sub-region. As a consequence, a distinct

administrative role at the regional level is emerging, and in some cases an individual is engaged to support the coordinators operating at the sub-regional level by managing funds, distributing materials, collating statistics, and organizing reflection gatherings.

4.4   Enhancing the Capacity of the Institute Itself

As more and more clusters advance and the work of the institute increases in complexity, well-defined measures are introduced to help cluster and regional or national coordinators to grow in capability, heightening their knowledge of the Faith, their understanding of the Plan's overarching conceptual framework, and their appreciation of the nature and purpose of the institute process. Their ability to explore the reality of their region or country, to assess progress, and to plan effectively can be enhanced, and certain practical abilities such as using statistical information in reflection and planning and managing judiciously the funds of the Faith can be developed. Capacities such as building environments of cooperation and unity are also cultivated. Some of these capacities are acquired naturally through experience as coordinators are assisted to carry out their work. Institutes identify other practical means to help coordinators develop necessary abilities. For instance, individuals with relevant experience can help others; at times the institute can draw on other educational programmes of the Faith such as those offered by Bahá'í-inspired agencies; and in some cases, coordinators and others serving the institute full-time have been supported to attend relevant training programmes offered by various institutions of learning.

In addition, an institute can benefit from the contributions of other individuals with specialized skills who are involved in the general community-building work of the Faith. Examples of such skills include translating educational materials, managing finances, and documenting learning. Through ongoing assessment of the institute's evolving human resource needs and review of the measures in place to raise the capacity of the friends serving as staff or as volunteers, those overseeing the institute's work determine ways of drawing on the friends with such abilities.

4.5   Managing Effectively the Financial and Material Resources

Managing with care the financial resources pertains to all aspects and levels of the institute's operations. When they are planning and budgeting, the friends consider not only what comes from the Funds of the Faith but also what the local friends and community can offer through whatever means available to them. On their part, institute boards, in collaboration with coordinators and Auxiliary Board members, ensure that each activity at the grassroots has the required resources. In that light, effective channels for the flow of funds from the national or regional to the cluster level are put in place and simple and straightforward arrangements for maintaining accurate accounts are made. Awareness that the resources of the friends and funds of the Faith are precious and not unlimited generates commitment to efficiency. Financial management itself is approached with an attitude of learning, and practices such as periodic budget monitoring and annual financial reporting and auditing are established.

An effective system for the production and distribution of institute materials is, of course, vital. Sometimes lack of such a system has disrupted the progress of the three educational imperatives and the vitality of the community-building process itself. Careful thought is to be given to how the materials are stored and how they are provided to each individual studying the courses so that unnecessary waste does not occur. Some institutes utilize various approaches in

this regard. They ensure that cluster coordinators have access to basic storage space and that when participants can afford to purchase the texts they are encouraged to do so.

4.6   Some Administrative Aspects

4.6.1 Remuneration of institute staff

An important aspect of the management of financial resources is the remuneration of institute staff. As the number of study circles, children's classes, and junior youth groups expands in a country or region, more and more people deepen their sense of ownership and desire to contribute to the betterment of society, and some among them dedicate a substantial amount of their time to the work of the institute. From among those serving as coordinators, some might require financial assistance for a period of time. There are a number of principles to be considered by institutes in this regard. Of course, capacity for coordination cannot be built by simply multiplying the number of coordinators serving full time and receiving remuneration. At the cluster level, the remuneration offered to some coordinators is essentially a short-term arrangement that is arrived at through conversation with each individual being invited to serve in this manner and requiring such assistance. Based on determined needs, factors that could be taken into consideration include "whether the person resides in a rural or urban area, is required to change residence, has a family, or intends to pursue further education".[34] While decisions made will differ from one person to another, the system will reflect an overall consistency. Additional considerations may be necessary at the regional or national level. Some of the friends serving full time and receiving remuneration might, for instance, need to continue receiving such assistance for an extended period in order to ensure that the learning processes across the entire region or country are sustained. In any case, it can be expected that whether at the cluster, regional, or national level, the needs of some individuals might sometimes "exceed what can reasonably be met by the funds of the Faith".[35] A realistic range of remuneration can be established. In creating a framework for offering remuneration to the friends, a National Spiritual Assembly, in consultation with the Counsellors and the institute board, determines what would, in general, constitute a reasonable period during which an individual serving as a cluster coordinator or as a regional or national coordinator may be provided with remuneration.

4.6.2 Managing statistics

The availability of accurate and up-to-date statistical information helps the friends overseeing the work of the training institute to "remain fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and what is being learned in the clusters whose progress they oversee".[36] The information is, of course, essential in the institute's planning and decision-making processes. A proper system for gathering and analysing statistical information requires that effective instruments are put in place for this purpose, and the Statistical Report Program (SRP) is helpful in this regard. A new version of this tool—combining its earlier versions and the Cluster Growth Profile—is already being used in many regions and clusters. Ultimately, effective management and use of statistics depends on close collaboration between cluster coordinators and Area Teaching Committees, as well as between national or regional coordinators and Regional Bahá'í Councils.

4.7   The Training Institute Board

As institutes advance as organizational structures, the role of institute boards assumes ever-greater importance. The members of an institute board are appointed by the National Spiritual Assembly or Regional Bahá'í Council, in consultation with the Counsellors, usually for a term of two to three years. Through various means, including meetings and special occasions for consultation, boards watch over the work of the institutes. They follow the unfoldment of the learning processes associated with study circles, children's classes, and junior youth groups, facilitate the formulation of vision, pay attention to the administrative matters of institutes, and liaise closely with the Counsellors and with National Assemblies or Regional Councils, as the case may be. When they are composed of individuals with the requisite experience and who are personally involved in the community-building process, and when they are able to foster effective consultative relationships with others, appreciable progress can be made in a relatively short period of time. Although all do not function in the same way and the issues they face vary in complexity, growing demands on institutes to continue attaining higher and higher levels of functioning require that boards too become increasingly capable of carrying out their responsibilities.

REFERENCES

[1] Message dated 29 December 2015 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Message dated 12 December 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies.

[5] Message dated 29 December 2015.

[6] Riḍván 2010 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

[10] Riḍván 2010 message.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Message dated 29 December 2015.

[13] Riḍván 2010 message.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Message dated 29 December 2015.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

[21] Message dated 12 December 2011.

[22] "Training Institutes" (A document prepared for and approved by the Universal House of Justice, April 1998).

[23] Letter dated 24 December 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly.

[24] Message dated 12 December 2011.

[25] Message dated 27 December 2005.

[26] Message dated 29 December 2015.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Riḍván 2010 message.

[30] Riḍván 1996 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Western and Central Asia.

[31] Message dated 29 December 2015.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Message dated 28 December 2010.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Message dated 29 December 2015.