

# *Opening Education for All: ODL Policy for the Caribbean*

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Hon Minister Fazal Karim, Dr Morella Joseph, Dr Eduardo Ali and Colleagues.

It is a pleasure to be here at CARICOM-COL workshop on the finalization of an open and distance learning policy framework for the Caribbean. Thank you all for coming to this important event. It has been possible for me to be here as it coincides with COL's triennial meeting of the Regional Focal Points being organized in collaboration with the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Development. The Hon Minister is a strong supporter of COL and its work and this is the second meeting of Focal Points that he's hosting in the Port of Spain. The Focal Points meetings are part of our Commonwealth-wide consultative process as we develop a strategic plan beyond 2015.

In fact, developing a regional ODL policy was one of the recommendations made by the Focal Points when they met in 2011. I'm glad that the policy framework has reached the final boarding stages and that it has been developed through a process of consultation around the Caribbean. This engagement of the wider community and the sense of ownership developed by national and regional entities will determine the extent to which this policy is adopted and ultimately implemented.

Open and Distance Learning has a long history and continues to grow, especially in the developing world, where the demand for tertiary education cannot be met through traditional campus-based approaches alone. The University of London, or the People's University, introduced the notion of higher education without boundaries in 1858—not just geographical boundaries, and its first external exams in the Caribbean were held in Queen's Royal College, Port of Spain in the 1870's, but also boundaries of social class, aspiring to reach the 'shoemaker in his garret'. The External Degrees became an influential model for the foundations of many universities in the colonies and led to the establishment of the University College of the West Indies in 1945. Correspondence courses followed external degrees as the yet another phase in opening up education further and many in the Caribbean studied law and teacher education through this mode.

Forty years ago, the Open University, UK was launched to open up education to large numbers of people. That was when the term 'open education' became popular and the model captured the imagination of

policy makers around the world. The success of the British Open University led to a huge expansion in open universities, particularly in the developing world. Asia alone has over 70 open universities and the numbers continue to grow.[1] The next wave of open universities are being established in Africa.

Why are open universities so popular with policy makers? One reason is lower costs. The annual cost per student at the Korean National Open University is \$ 186 as compared to nearly \$3000 for a campus student. Dual mode provision similarly has lower costs. The University of Nairobi BEd programme costs three times as much as a distance learning programme. A study by the National Knowledge Commission, India, shows that mega-universities, which achieve economies of scale cost substantially less than campus institutions. Pakistan's AIOU costs 22%; China 40%; India's IGNOU 35% and the OUUK, 50% as compared to campus universities.

It is not just open universities but also open schools which provide cost-effective secondary education. The Namibian Open School costs one fifth of what it would need to put a learner through a conventional school. In India, the open school costs one tenth of student costs in a government school. The same cost efficiencies are evident in flexible and blended approaches to TVET.

What of quality? In 2012, the Open University of the UK ranked first in student satisfaction. In addition the UKOU ranked fifth among the 100 universities surveyed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK and was one rank higher than Oxford University. It is clear from examples around the world that, if done well, ODL can not only increase access but also cut costs and enhance the quality of education.

However, in spite of this massive expansion, there seems to be an increasing resistance to ODL in many developing countries. Even as distance education continues to grow, we see an opposition that seeks to raise barriers in various forms. A legislation from Equador illustrates the constant struggle for recognition and 'parity of esteem' that ODL institutions continue to face. The call for no government employment for ODL graduates is surely unreasonable, since most of the institutions have been established by the governments in the respective countries.

It is interesting that on the one hand, governments are establishing ODL institutions to enhance access to tertiary education, on the other they create barriers which continue to relegate distance education to secondary status. Research findings show that there is 'no significant difference' between distance and traditional classroom instruction in terms of learning outcomes; yet there is a lingering perception, especially in the developing world, that distance education is not just as effective or adequate as formal education.

What can be done? Several things: evidence-based advocacy; capacity development and effective provision. Effective provision is based on three broad areas: quality materials, student support and efficient administration. We need a policy to provide an enabling framework for the growth and development of ODL; we need appropriate Quality Assurance policies to ensure that the highest standards are upheld and our learners are able to achieve the best outcomes and compete at the global level.

As we finalise the ODL policy, we need to keep in mind the new developments that have emerged in the past decade. These are the growth of online learning, the emergence of Open Education Resources and MOOCs. Antigua and Barbuda have integrated an OER policy in their ICT in Education policy, which

has been approved by Cabinet. This is being cited as an example of good practice in the Pacific where some countries are in the process of developing ICT in Education policies.

Developments in technology will give rise to further developments in opening up education and we need a policy that will be flexible enough to incorporate these as they unfold. Let us develop a policy which will be flexible enough to incorporate emerging developments so that what we envision today seems contemporary and relevant even ten years down the line.

Finally policy development must lead to policy implementation. This often requires a great deal of capacity building. COL has the some of the best resources in the world in open distance and elearning. COL is your organization and you are most welcome to use these as required. We at COL are ready to accompany you on your journey and wish you the very best in your deliberations.

## References

[1] C Latchem & Insung Jung: Distance and Blended Learning in Asia, NY London: Routledge, 2009, p.xiii