Trends & Issues in ODL

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth comprises 53 countries, of which 32 are small states (those with less than 4.5 million population), all of which now participate in Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

COL works with Ministries and national institutions to establish policy and build skills in open and distance learning (ODL) and technology mediated learning. The focus was initially on radio and TV and has now moved to include computers and the Internet without losing the recognition of the value of radio and TV. Print is still the most universally usable technology that has the ability to reach the most people.

The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) and Open Educational Resources OERs)

The concept of sharing content, or Open Educational Resources (OERs) along with developing the skills needed to develop learning content was included in the establishment of the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth. I compliment Mauritius on Ricaud Auckbur, Director Post Secondary and Tertiary Section on being a member of the Management Committee of the VUSSC.

In developing sustainability models for OERs, it is important that learning content being developed in faraway parts of the world may be of use to you as well as your content being usable by others. They should be adaptable, integrated and localised "here" - wherever "here" may be. Remember that wherever "here" is, it is always on the far side of the world compared to someone else and that means in countries that have different languages, cultures and other norms. Learning materials will become OERs when they are shared in two directions and not just one; there cannot just be donor countries for OERs in some parts of the world with consumer countries in other parts of the world.

The copyright hurdle

We all represent minorities in the world and any rules we try to impose do not necessarily suit the rest of the world's population. The world is diverse and appears to be becoming more diverse. Globalisation does not just mean exporting some cultural norms from country to others, it also means keeping and sharing our cultures and norms, including those from the smallest countries of the world. We need to accept and enjoy diversity. COL is working on "respect and understanding" and OERs need also, to respect other people's choices. This needs to carry through to the sharing of Open Educational Resources - keeping them flexible and open and not tying them down to any one particular ideology of copyright licensing or format.

So OERs have great value if they are not hobbled by lists of restrictions. On the lighter side, OERs sometimes remind me of a friend who once said to me: "Be reasonable, do it my way!"

The legal world, while sometimes slow to respond, does respond where it is needed. Criminal activities recently conducted through social networking sites are an indicator that the wheels of the legal justice system will now begin to respond to website that inside crimes, suicide and promote thuggery. You can take action now to ensure that your institutions do not support what would be seen as criminal or anti-social behaviour in the "1st life" (the physical world), only for a few people to think is acceptable behaviour in the "2nd life" (online).

Quality of programmes

COL is working on a few initiatives to support the enhancement of quality. The Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth is engaged in the establishment of a Transnational Qualifications Framework. Mauritius can be proud that Kylash Algoo, the Director of the Mauritius Qualifications Authority is the chair of the management committee of the TQF. This framework will assist small countries to develop national systems that are more interoperable across the world, making it more feasible for qualified people from small states to have their qualifications recognised in other countries. It will also help your institutions to command the respect they deserve when they advertise courses run from your country to learners living around the world. Courses and programmes that have acquired the necessary national and regional credentials will be recorded on the VUSSC-TQF website along with the information to enable potential learners to judge the programme worthy of their time and money.

Another trend to watch is the improvement in quality of contributory websites. We have gone from edited newsletters in the 90s to anything goes blogs of the early 2000s and now there seems to be a trend back toward quality. Blogs, wikis and websites should not be an excuse for publishing materials we would never want to see in print. I expect to see the wild-west culture of the Internet having to come to terms with sharing the planet with law abiding and decent people!

Degree Mills and Bogus Institutions

For a while, some rather dubious companies found they could setup institutions in developing countries and offer qualifications. Sometimes it only takes the payment of a fee to receive a certificate and other times, the courses for which learners pay good money end up being worthless. These institutions are not recognised in either their host countries nor the countries in which the founders live - they a bogus and governments need to identify them and shut them down. They just give education a bad name. Learners need to take care of what they use on the Internet and ensure that the sources of their information are credible. These are all part of the new life skills needed in the eWorld.

The registry of accredited institutions that UNESCO is establishing will help learners identify the bogus institutions and avoid them.