International Perspectives on
Open Learning and Distance
Education

International Perspectives on Open Learning and Distance Education, National Forum on Open Learning and Distance Education, The Gambia, 12-14 April, 2005

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Transcript

Your Excellency, Honourable Secretaries of State, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen:

When the African Ministers of Education met in Dar es Salaam in December 2002, they deliberated on the education challenges facing Africa and noted that Open and Distance Learning should be considered an important strategy in addressing these challenges. The MINEDAF VIII Declaration advised governments to 'include open and distance learning in all national plans and policies, especially in the areas of teacher training and access to basic education and to improve the quality of teaching and learning'. As a former Vice Chancellor of the British Open University and as Assistant Director General of UNESCO, this was music to my ears. As President COL, this is my mission and mandate.

The Commonwealth of Learning is honoured to be associated with this event and I wish to compliment our host Ms Fatou Faye, Honourable Secretary of State on her vision and foresight in organising a National Forum on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for policy-makers and practitioners. The organisation of this forum is a clear indication of the deep commitment of the Government of The Gambia to exploring innovative and diverse delivery mechanisms to bring education and training to all its people. It is also a recognition of the fact that distance education could well be a viable means of human resource development in The Gambia as it has indeed been in many other parts of the developing world.

It was a great pleasure to be in The Gambia in January this year. This was my first visit to The Gambia in my new capacity as President of the Commonwealth of Learning. However, this was not my first contact with your country. I have worked with so many distinguished Gambians and particularly your former Secretary of State for Education Ms Anne Therese Ndong Jatta during my recent time as Assistant Director-General at UNESCO.
The title of my presentation today is International Perspectives in Open Learning and Distance Education.

I shall begin by recalling what open learning and distance education are. Then I shall review briefly some of the history, show why open learning and distance education are important, and identify the important trends today. This will lead me, in a third section, not only to take an international perspective but to draw from it conclusions for The Gambia.

This is a Forum about policy making. Helping governments to develop policies on open and distance learning is COL's main programme and I shall argue for the importance of policy making. Policy making takes place in a context and I shall suggest that the context for us here is the development agenda expressed in the Millennium Development Goals and, most particularly, the agenda of Education for All set at Dakar nearly five years ago.

Open and Distance Learning: What is it?

So let me begin by looking with you at these terms open learning and distance education.

The term open learning describes policies and practices that permit entry to learning with as few barriers as possible. People can face many barriers to learning. For example, there may be age barriers. I am told that when Kenya threw open its schools one eighty-year-old man put on short trousers and turned up to the school in his village saying that he had come for the education that he had never been able to have before.

In too many countries there are still barriers of gender. I am not talking about formal discrimination against girls, but about the many informal barriers that explain why boys outnumber girls in school in most countries. Maybe the school is a long way away and parents don't think the walk to school is safe for their daughter. Maybe the school is not fenced, or has no toilets. Perhaps there are few female teachers to give role models for girls. An ideally open school would do away with these barriers.

In reality it is impossible for education to be open on every imaginable dimension. When people put the label 'open' on a college, school, or university they usually concentrate its meaning on an aspect of openness that will be particularly appreciated by the students. For example, when they created the Open University in the UK in 1969 it based its claim to be open on abolishing all academic prerequisites for entry. You did not have to show any evidence of having been to school or passed any exams. Once you started you had to work hard to pass your courses and continue - but there were no barriers to starting. That open admissions policy was very radical for the UK in those days.

But the Open University was not open on some other dimensions. You could not enrol unless you were aged over 21, so there was an age barrier. You had to study at a prescribed pace, between fixed dates for starting and finishing, so there was a barrier of time. To other open institutions, such as Athabasca University in Canada, that did not have an age barrier and allowed you to start your course at the beginning of any month and take as long as you liked, the UK Open University didn't seem particularly
open on the dimensions that they valued.

So, in sum, open learning is a relative term but it does express the ambition of an institution to remove those barriers to learning that are particularly troublesome in its own environment.

Distance education is the delivery of learning or training to learners who are separated, mostly by time and space, from those who are teaching and training. Because learners and teachers are separated by time and space some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them. If you live in a remote area distance education is clearly also a form of open learning, because studying is open to you in a way that it was not before. However, distance education does not necessarily have to be open on other dimensions, such as admission pre-requisites or timetables of study.

I add that distance education can operate at all levels. Governments in Australia, Canada and New Zealand have been using distance education at the school level for many years. At the Commonwealth of Learning we are busily engaged in helping various countries, notably in the Pacific, to use distance education for technical and vocational education and training (TVET). People used to joke that you wouldn't want to be operated on by a surgeon who had studied at a distance, but today much continuing medical education takes place at a distance. They used to say the same about airline pilots, but when you think about it the flight simulators in which trainee pilots spend many hours are a form of distance learning.

In reality, although open learning and distance education are conceptually distinct, as I have just tried to show, they are clearly complementary. It's hard to get far into opening up learning without introducing some elements of distance education whereas introducing distance education inevitably opens up learning in new ways for many people.

For this reason is has become common to bring these two terms together in the expression open and distance learning or ODL, which is a bit clumsy but people know what it means. However, either because these terms don't please everyone or because people like novelty, new terms keep appearing in the general area of ODL.

Three of them are eLearning, online learning, and virtual learning. All three terms used to mean - say three years ago - that the learner was connected to a computer and was learning through the computer and the networks that it was connected to.

Today people seem to be less strict about how they use these terms. They tend to use all three terms, eLearning, online learning and virtual learning, to refer to learning with a variety of media, not just computers. They have evolved to designate forms of ODL that include more than just print and paper.

Another recent term, that reflects the growing trend of mixing ODL with conventional face-to-face teaching, is flexible learning, which is, of course, a nice flexible term.
Trends and Cycles of History in ODL

Let me now attempt a brief history of ODL. My purpose is not to give you an overview, but to draw attention to some key trends. I shall call this 'cycles of history' in ODL because there is a cyclical aspect to some of the trends.

St. Paul and the two pillars of distance education

I like to start my history of ODL with Saint Paul. His letters, or epistles, to the young churches around the Mediterranean in the first century AD, were a powerful form of distance teaching. They were also a good example of flexible learning because there were few copies of each letter so most people heard them read out when their local church assembled. Only a very few people would have had copies to read at home.

If you judge by the subsequent growth of the Christian church, Saint Paul's epistles are - because they continue to be read today - the most successful application of distance learning in history. Their success was founded on the two elements that continue to distinguish the most successful distance education practice today.

MATERIALS + SUPPORT

First, you have a carefully written text that presents and explains the subject matter. Second, you have a meeting of interested students guided by a tutor who can give further explanations of the text, answer questions and test understanding.

Today the text may not be on paper and the meeting may not take place face to face, but these two elements remain the two pillars of distance education.

I should also note that St. Paul's distance education was a private initiative, not something backed by the state. Indeed, both the Roman and Jewish authorities considered what he was doing to be highly subversive. This too can be a feature of distance education.

Printing and posting: distance learning for individuals

The next development of distance education made it possible for individuals to learn at a distance without having to assemble in groups as the young Christian churches had done. Distance learning for the individual had to await two new technologies.

First, the technology of printing made it possible to produce many copies of a text at relatively low cost. Second, the creation of universal postal systems allowed documents to be mailed to people all over a country so that they could receive them at home.

Those who complain that education is slow to adopt new technologies might note that correspondence
education began almost immediately after Britain introduced a universal postal system, the Penny Post, in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Isaac Pitman offered a course in shorthand almost immediately and correspondence education was born. It began as a private commercial venture and correspondence education has always retained a strong commercial component, even though governments and public universities also began offering correspondence education in the 20th century.

As the name implies, correspondence education usually involved mail going in two directions: the school mailed instructional texts to the students; each student mailed back homework which would be corrected and commented on by a tutor and returned to the student.

This is nicely described by the famous phrase of Borje Holmberg, the great scholar of correspondence education, who called this process a 'guided didactic conversation'. The establishment of a guided didactic conversation is another pillar of good distance education practice.

For over a century from the 19th century until the last half of the 20th century correspondence education brought great benefits to large numbers of people. It seems to me that this contribution was never properly recognised, partly because it involved individuals learning privately and partly because the correspondence schools were mostly private enterprises.

This combination, private individuals dealing with private companies, was also the explanation for the abuses that gave correspondence education a bad name and caused a backlash against it in the 1960s.

Political profile and mass media: distance education at scale

Two trends came together in the 1960s to create the modern revolution that brought together open learning and distance education in an explicit manner and dramatically increased the impact and effectiveness of ODL.

First, the 1960s were a time when all governments gave high priority to expanding education at all levels. In the western world this expansion focused on expanding universities for young full-time students, leaving the challenge of how to provide for the many older people who had missed the chance of going to university when access was very limited.

Second, the 1960s were a time of effervescence and enthusiasm for communications technology. In this respect it was rather like today, except that the exciting technology of the time was television. Many people thought that television was far too important to be limited to entertainment and wanted to harness it to education as well.

These trends merged most impressively in the United Kingdom with the creation of the Open University in 1969. The Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, wanted to open up higher education to the millions who had missed it when they were younger. He thought that the mass media could provide a vehicle. As an
academic, he also liked the idea of opening up university life to public view, so that even those who did not become students could take part, through television, in intellectual discussions.

The establishment and growth of the Open University is a remarkable story that I do not have time to tell here. Many people, both politicians and academics, contributed to its success.

Most importantly, it was an ambitious project: ambitious in scope, ambitious in scale and ambitious in quality. These ambitions motivated the Open University's first Vice-Chancellor, Walter Perry.

He took the job because he thought that the quality of teaching in the existing universities was terrible and wanted to improve it. He determined to create a 'real' university that would conduct research as well as teaching. He decided to operate at scale, taking 25,000 students in the first intake and ignoring the cautious civil servants who advised him to do a small pilot project to see if the new distance teaching university would work.

Perry had seized on a very important principle. He realised that if much of the Open University's teaching were carried by mass media such as print, TV and radio then it could benefit from great economies of scale. These media are cheap to reproduce or broadcast at scale once you have the first copy. However, the first copy, if it is produced to world-class academic and pedagogical standards, is expensive to make. Perry understood that the Open University had to operate at scale to justify the investment he intended to make in materials - but also that if he operated at scale he would be able to cut the costs of higher education substantially.

Breaking the Iron Triangle

I want to emphasise this point further. Throughout history education has been constrained by what I call the iron triangle. Our wish is to make quality education available to everyone at low cost. This is the triangle of quality, access and cost.

Unfortunately, if you increase access by putting more people in the class people will accuse you of lowering quality. If you try to avoid that accusation you normally have to raise costs, and so on. We have become so used to accepting these constraints that we have allowed an insidious link to develop in our minds between quality and exclusivity.

The revolution of ODL with mass media broke open the iron triangle. With the mass media big is beautiful. You can operate at large scale with high quality and low costs. Harnessing the mass media to higher education enabled the Open University to excel in all three dimensions and reshape the triangle.

It immediately became the largest university in Britain. When the Open University celebrated its 25th anniversary there were more students in the Open University alone, some 150,000, than there had been in all UK universities combined in the year that the creation of the university had been announced.

Regarding quality, the most recent independent rankings of quality of programmes in UK universities put
the Open University in 5th place out of 100 institutions.

Cost studies conducted by the UK government show that however the calculations are done, the total cost of an Open University degree is substantially less than in conventional institutions.

Interaction and independence: getting the mixture right

However, I would leave out an important part of the story if I gave you the impression that Walter Perry simply took advantage of the economies of scale of the mass media. He was motivated, you will remember, by a desire to improve the quality of university teaching. That required people contact.

He was determined to break with the legacy of poor correspondence education that abandoned students to struggle and drop out on their own. This led the Open University to develop extensive and intensive student support services, both to help them in the academic aspects of their courses and with the new experience of being a distance learner.

The challenge is that student support is inherently more labour intensive than using the mass media to allow students to learn independently. Student support through people does not have the same potential for economies of scale. Therefore the fundamental dilemma in designing a distance learning system is to get a good balance between using the media so that students can learn independently and using tutors so that they can be well supported.

This balance has to be right in economic terms, in pedagogical terms and in terms of convenience for the student. Too much personal support, such as meetings and other timetabled events, can put constraints on students that make learning less open as well as more expensive. On the other hand too much reliance on media and independent learning can undermine the student's motivation.

ODL in the era of eLearning

I conclude my historical survey by commenting the recent trends in ODL. The most important trend is eLearning and this is too new for definitive judgements. A feature of the history of education, going right back to the invention of the blackboard in 1850, is that each new technology is hailed as the harbinger of an educational revolution. It was true of radio, film, television, programmed learning and computers and it has been true most recently of online communication.

Like many other areas of human life, education was swept up in the dot.com frenzy of 1999-2000 when some prophets argued that the Internet would be the only vehicle for education in the future. Those prophesies look silly today, but it is a feature of new developments that we tend to overestimate their immediate impact and underestimate their long-term impact. Studies show that eLearning has not delivered on the extravagant claims that were made for it four years ago.

However, eLearning is gradually seeping into education at all levels and contributing to the trend to flexible education. This is reflected, as I mentioned earlier, in the slippage of the meaning of the term
eLearning to mean a broader approach to ODL than pure Internet.

In terms of the trends that I have identified I make two remarks about eLearning. First, it shares some of the features of correspondence education and, like correspondence education, has attracted many private sector players. At its best it enables a much more sustained 'guided didactic conversation' than the delays of the postal service allowed. At its worst it allows fraudsters to take students’ money before closing down their website as they put their profits in the bank.

Second, the Internet is not, and probably never will be a mass medium - even if the day comes when everyone is connected to it. Telephone is not radio, even in well-connected communities. Internet learning alone cannot have the mass impact on access that was achieved with the mass media of broadcast and print. This partly explains why the pure Internet learning operations that were launched in the enthusiasm of the dot.com frenzy have either disappeared or broadened out to take a multi-media approach.

The other reason for evolution towards multi-media, or perhaps another way of saying the same thing, is that students like variety and like changing from one learning medium to another. For most people a well-produced book is more satisfying to use as a book than as a downloaded file on their computer screen.

I began these remarks about the history of ODL by talking about cycles of history. You can see now that spiral is a more apt word than cycle. For example, Internet learning is like correspondence learning but takes place at a higher level of sophistication and power.

An International Perspective

These remarks lead nicely into my comments on ODL from an international perspective. In this era of globalisation you might not expect a technology-based endeavour like ODL to be very different from country to country. That there are actually considerable national differences owes more to political and economic environments than to technology.

Not surprisingly ODL is most successful and most vibrant in countries with pressing educational needs and governments that are committed to deploying ODL to meet some of those needs. As I noted earlier, this was the case for the UK in 1960s and 1970s. The country wanted to expand higher education and political parties from both ends of the political spectrum built up the Open University as a way to do it.

Today India is the undoubted world leader in ODL not only by the volume of its activity but also its diversity. 20% of students in Indian higher education are in the national and state open universities with 10% of them, or one million students, in the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) alone. Government policy is to raise the 20% figure to 40%. India is also ahead of other countries in using ODL at secondary level, with 700,000 pupils in its National Institute of Open Schooling.

India owes its leadership to clear government policy and a number of highly able and innovative institutional leaders. Clear government policy is particularly important because it allows public goods, such as national satellites, to be used for education. Thus IGNOU is extending its scope by operating a
number of satellite TV channels.

In other countries it is interesting to note how government policy has evolved to give greater importance to ODL. Korea and Indonesia, for example, created open universities in the 1980s but saw them more as a safety valve in the higher education system than as real universities. More recently both countries have given much greater importance these institutions, linking them explicitly with national policies for ICTs and connectivity.

In all countries conventional educational institutions, most notably at university level, are adding ODL activities to their face-to-face teaching and becoming 'dual-mode' institutions. Making this combination work effectively - and cost-effectively - is not straightforward. Experience shows, once again, that strong institutional leadership and willpower is essential to make dual-mode institutions work well.

Conclusions for The Gambia

I hope that these brief comments about the history of open and distance learning and its profile around the world will provide a useful backdrop for The Gambia's National Forum on ODL, which COL is proud to support. I end with four concluding remarks.

First, all the evidence that I have outlined shows that a country with a clear policy for the development of ODL will achieve greater impact and better service for its people than a country that leaves it up to individual and institutional initiatives to determine the role of ODL in the education system. The holding of this Forum is therefore a promising step. The Commonwealth of Learning is proud to have supported Gambian educators to attend various workshops and meetings on ODL in recent times so you have a good reservoir of Gambian talent to draw on.

Second, The Gambia as a small country is an almost perfect candidate for ODL. By 2015, when the effects of your education for all policy will be fully felt, you will be able to operate distance education at scale at tertiary and secondary levels. I understand from the SoS that funding for UPE from the Fast-Track Initiative is leading to progress in basic education. The central focus now is on building quality in three areas: teacher training; creating organisational and human capacity for ODL and extending education in science and technology. I advise you to focus on forms of ODL that exploit the advantages of the mass media while at the same time beginning the steady development of supportive electronic networks.

Third, I urge you to put in place a strong national framework to support your ODL developments, most especially a national quality assurance framework. It is within this framework that your ODL Centre will operate most effectively to serve the three key sectors: education, health and agriculture.

Fourth, be ambitious. Those who built today's most successful ODL systems wanted to change the world, and they did so. The Gambia has demonstrated its ambition by talking the path less travelled. It is neither
setting up an open university nor evolving existing institutions into dual-mode but is creating a third model of open and distance learning delivery by setting up an ODL Centre. It can now use ODL to open up education and training at all levels and provide a model for the whole of Africa.

I end by assuring you that the Commonwealth of Learning is eager to accompany you on your journey to the development of policy and practice. We think that education in The Gambia is at an important crossroads. We want to see you take the correct road and move down it resolutely for the benefit of all Gambians.

THANK YOU