Global Trends in Distance Learning: A Broad Overview

KOTA OPEN UNIVERSITY

National Seminar on Globalisation and New Challenges to Open Learning Systems

11 February 1996

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It gives me enormous pleasure to attend this meeting today and share with you some thoughts on the environment, issues, challenges, opportunities and practise of higher distance and open education around us. I do not wish to describe ad nauseam the typologies of distance education around the globe (there are some good accounts of these which you can read for yourself), but look at some major trends that are emerging and draw some conclusions from these as to what future distance education globally may look like in the next century. As you would appreciate, given my experience, I am guided by what is happening in the dedicated distance teaching institutions around the Commonwealth rather than the entire world. However, important developments are taking place elsewhere which will have an impact on all of us. Therefore, with your indulgence, I will attempt to wrap this discussion by drawing on developments peripheral to education per se especially in areas such as the information highway which in one way or another will have a role to play in our sector.

All over the world, but certainly in this part of the world, learning has become synonymous with increase in wealth, health, productivity, social mobility, equity, human and cultural rights and participatory citizenship. Advanced and new democracies as they begin to prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the next millennium are struggling to make learning and knowledge a central aspect of their social and economic activity. Until the mid-sixties of this century, education was no more than an initiation into social and economic life. This was reflected in policies and practices that attempted at making schooling universal. Today's ambition is to make the acquisition of knowledge a life-long activity in which the school becomes the laboratory for making individuals mature learners with an autonomous capacity to self-learn outside school walls throughout their lives. I would like to share with you some of the current provisions in some parts of the world where learning is taking place beyond school walls.

The popular wish to learn beyond school seems to be a pragmatic response arising out of a combination of new pressures and new opportunities. The OECD, in a recent report, suggests that developments in the knowledge and information sectors in every aspect of our social and economic life may have a role in this - "these technologies create an enormous potential for an increase in knowledge and its applications, through intelligent use of information to which they offer access. The growing social and economic importance of knowledge simultaneously increases the demand for learning and creates new possibilities in terms of how it might take place".

In 1990 globally, there were some 48 million students at universities, including some 17 million in Asia - this represented about 12 percent participation from a catchment of about 407 million in the 18 to 21 years age cohort. In an interesting market driven study done for the International Development Program of Australia, it was estimated that the growth in university enrolments from this baseline will go up to 20 percent by the year 2010. This is not a reflection of an increase in the population of the cohort but more due to other factors. In actual numbers, that will amount to 97 million individuals and if one applies the same growth rate for another 15 years we will witness some 159 million students in the 18 to 21 age group seeking tertiary study by the year 2025. Add to this number those who are above 21 and include also those who are currently not participating but may do so as pre-tertiary schooling improves and turns out more and more people with the capacity to study at the tertiary level. Conventional ways of delivering education especially at the tertiary level, to all those desiring it will become impractical in these circumstances. I will now take a few minutes to elaborate further on both the demand and the supply that is available and needed.

Some of you who are more accustomed to viewing education in noble terms may find it offensive to see terms such as demand and supply applied to it. But if you view your relationship with students in terms of "service" provided by individual academics or their institutions, then the metaphor does have a meaning. Adult students, like those who choose to study at open universities, basically seek to fulfil a desire to learn - they therefore are a demand. These clients clearly know what they want to learn, when they want to learn it and how the learning is preferred; in such circumstances, institutions have to be sensitive to the desires of their learners and not to the desires of the staff.

In many parts of the world, economies have been undergoing structural changes. This has in one way or another precipitated in removing many jobs of low value and even lower skills; labour therefore has to be retrained and reskilled; individuals have come to look upon training as important to their lives; for entirely different reasons employees of the labour force have also come to look upon training and education as important for the well being of their investments. This increased social demand is characterised in three dimensions.

. Diversity of learners.

. Diversity of goals.

. Diversity of contexts.

If we examine some recent research, we can get some idea how the above is expressed in actual enrolments. In Hong Kong, for example, more students participate in tertiary education through distance learning, evening classes, the work place and continuing education than regular programmes; the situation is almost similar in the United Kingdom and a few other OECD countries. In all these countries, barriers to adult education has more or less disappeared thereby releasing a pent-up surge in enrolments.

As the nature of demand changes so too does the nature of supply. Increasingly, schools, colleges and universities are devising curriculum, delivery methods, assessment and award making to recognise the new learners and their needs. It now seems possible to think of a learner-centred environment as opposed to one where learners had to fit in with the agenda of faculty and institution. The nature of the supply is therefore changing in a number of ways; three major changes of note:

- Institutional Framework: is changing in many ways. Many institutions are becoming open to non-traditional learners, offering a wide variety of courses of flexible duration, and allowing students to move freely between off and on campus. Parallel with this development, is the arrival of new providers of education such as multinational companies and huge national conglomerates.

- Technological Framework: is changing with the arrival of faster,interactive world-wide based technologies. The electronic highway, about which much is spoken, is already becoming the backbone of a number of courses. The potential for low-cost 'real time' communication between any group of people from anywhere in the world using video, audio and written mode is allowing educators to deliver knowledge and skills almost as effectively as traditional delivery methods. The benefit of the newer technologies is not so much in the conquest of distance between learner and teacher (though this is important) but in the "transformation of relationship between learners, teachers and learning equipment". Students will truly have an opportunity with advanced software development to be in control of their learning.

- Financial Framework: will be changing as greater expansion of the educational demand takes place. Governments will be hard pressed to loosen control of the educational process as well as their role in financing these ventures. Those who benefit immediately from the education will be expected to meet the cost of the service themselves.

It is clear from the development of distance education over the last four decades or so that good quality training and education have gradually become more accessible to a far wider range of users than the previous century. Notwithstanding this remarkable progress, the next four decades should see education reaching out to an even wider group of individuals among whom the following should feature prominently:

- The long-term unemployed.

- Unskilled workers whose job categories are in decline.

- Women and girls.

- Adults who are illiterate and those with low functional literacy.

- Recent immigrants and refugees.

- The disabled.

- Non-nationals.

Providing learning to a diverse group of learners separated by space, time, prior learning skills, and new educational and training needs will need an infrastructure that is flexible, global in reach, interactive and affordable. Some examples of infrastructure which are available and already in use in a few selected universities and colleges include:

- Computerised access to databases from all over the world.

- Broadcast transmission of information and instruction created by the proliferation of satellite and cable channels.

- Video-conferencing for live communication.

- New digitised media such as CD-ROMs.

- Development of electronic networks linking computers on a local, national or international basis.

Given the huge potential and size of the learner catchment, these infrastructural facilities will have to be put in place in more institutions than the few where the systems are being tested on a modest scale on an ad hoc basis. These ad hoc arrangements are not adequate for the comprehensive changes that may have to happen if the vision of educating people for the 21st century needs to be realised. One way of achieving this mission would be to create more distance teaching institutions or alternatively the other way would be to persuade more and more institutions that teach largely through the face to face mode, to give thought to broadening their delivery methods. What learning will look like in the next 30 or 40 years is difficult to predict but what is predictable from all that we have observed in the last ten years is that:

(a) learning will be a part and parcel of every adult throughout his or her life;

(b) access to learning throughout life will need to become near universal;

(c) the technologies we will employ to deliver learning must be user centred;

(d) providers of learning products must adapt their ways to meet the changing demand of their clients and to maximise their potential for new delivery techniques; and

(e) learning will have to be a collaborative arrangement involving individuals, employers, governments and academe.