

# **Partnership for staff development between the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) Open College and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) of India: The experience of a participating scholar in this partnership.**

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## **Abstract**

Papua New Guinea is one of the developing island countries in the South Pacific that is yet to have a fully government funded and established Open and Distance Learning (ODL) tertiary institution. Although the need to establish a National Open University was captured in the country's fifty year national development road map plan called the PAPUA NEW GUINEA VISION 2050 (Guinea, Independent State of Papua New, 2009) launched in 2009, no significant progress has been made so far.

So in response to the country's PAPUA NEW GUINEA VISION 2050 plan to create a national Open University, Open College decided to build the capacity of its current administrative staff in distance education or ODL field. In June of 2011, it signed a collaborative partnership agreement with the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India and enrolled its first batch of eight of its middle management staff in the Masters in Distance Education (MADE) program, through ODL mode. IGNOU was chosen because of three (3) important factors. Firstly, it has extensive ODL experience and also has similar institutional partnerships with tertiary institutions in many countries in the Middle East, Africa and others (IGNOU, n.d.). Secondly India's development experiences and needs as a country are similar to Papua New Guinea and finally the fees were affordable.

The objectives of this paper are to share the learning experiences of as the pioneer participants of this historic institutional capacity building initiative between Open College and IGNOU. It also aims to highlight institutional problems which affected the smooth progress of the program which may be similar to other ODL institutional partnerships in cross country situations. Finally, to suggest possible options to avert such problems.

## **Background**

The Open College of the University of the Papua New Guinea (UPNG) was established in 2004 by the university within its structure to provide administrative and student support services to its Undergraduate and Certificate programs offered through ODL mode and in doing so UPNG became a dual mode university in the country. Since then, Open College has established study centers in all the twenty one provinces in the country. Provincial Governments have embraced Open College by providing state land and annual budgetary financial support for their respective provincial study centers. Today, UPNG Open College continues to be the leading institution not only in delivering selected UPNG undergraduate programs through ODL mode but also in promoting and advocating for more ODL tertiary institutions in the country.

When the directive to establish the Papua New Guinea Open University to coordinate the ODL programs of the four state universities (University of Papua New Guinea, University of Goroka, University of Technology and Divine Word University) was captured in the country's Papua New Guinea Vision 2050 plan, Open College saw the immediate need to up skill its middle management staff to best ODL management and practice skills. This was necessary to prepare its staff to adjust to whatever form or model the government adopts to establish the Open University as stipulated in the plan.

Therefore, Open College signed the Partner Institution agreement with IGNOU's Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) in 2011 and enrolled eight of its middle management staff under IGNOU's two year Masters in Distance Education (MADE) program. It starts with a one year Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE) and progression to MADE program for the second year depends on the successful completion of it.

### **Learning Experiences.**

To kick start the program two professors from IGNOU STRIDE visited Open College for a one week face to face interactive sessions. Sessions included, orientation to IGNOU's enrollment regulations, issuance of Student Enrollment numbers, examination rules and necessary advice and information required to successfully complete the program.

The visit by the professors was a motivational experience for many reasons. All of the eight (8) program participants including myself had no prior ODL learning experience. We all have progressed through primary and tertiary education through the conventional face to face mode. So to contemplate completing a Master's program through ODL was intimidating. All we had was our experience of managing ODL student affairs and in the process accumulated ODL management experience with no learning experience. We realized that we had assumed knowledge of ODL learning experience during our course of duties. So, we felt that work experience with Open College would help us complete the course as stated by David Kember, "experiences of adults are a rich and important learning resource" (Kember, 2007). So the visit really helped us to set our focus and put us at ease.

Another experience during the course of the program is that the program has enabled us to rediscover the relevance and importance of our assigned duties. This was due to the fact that our motivation for work became two fold. Firstly we regard our assigned duties on the job or position is to earn a living and secondly, with an investigative mindset to learn something towards our program of study. The combination of the two was a powerful learning experience.

The program also allowed us to discover all the different subsystems such as course development and printing, registration, student services and etc. that exist within an ODL institutions and justifications for their existence. Clear understanding of their interdependence and synchronizing their activities are important to creating an enriching ODL learning experience.

## **Institutional Problems.**

After the smooth start, we encountered three (3) major problems during the middle and end of the program.

Firstly, the medium of delivery was print medium and mode of communication with IGNOU was via email. By the nature of their visit the two professors who visited Open College became our point of contact. What we not made aware of in the initial stages was the different functional departments at IGNOU responsible for important activities such as Registration, Examination and etc. Therefore, we had difficulty in applying for our final examinations in June, 2012 and again in December. After several emails exchanges, we finally met the requirements to sit the Examinations and sat for the Post Graduate part in June this year. This means that, we will finish the program in June 2014, in three years rather than the initial plan of two years.

Secondly, our Student Login account was created in the IGNOU website student portal but were never communicated to us to fully utilize the services offered there. By the time we visited the website and found out we were able to login, we regretted we had not tried earlier and completed the program with only the print material send to us.

Finally, IGNOU was not flexible enough to accommodate our need for Final Examination. We had to follow IGNOU's Examination Schedule which clashed with our operational calendar activities. As a result, when we missed the June 2012 Examination session and also the December 2012 session. We had to wait a whole year, just to sit the Final Examinations.

## **Summary**

The experiences of this partnership program between Open College and IGNOU exposes the following notable areas of consideration for any similar institutional partnerships between any two ODL institutions in areas of staff development. In particular reference to developing island nations in the commonwealth like Papua New Guinea.

- Majority of the staff working in ODL institutions will be graduates of conventional face to face institutions. As such, the ODL institution must make provisions for its staff to enroll in any ODL program either within the country or outside to experience the ODL learning experience. This experience will help the staff contribute to implementing changes which can improve learning experience and remove elements which can create negative experience in a student because they can judge better.
- The coordinating unit or department of the program host institution needs to communicate with the partner institution all relevant procedural requirements and possible penalties at the beginning stages and monitor their compliance during the course of the program.
- After the completion of the prescribed academic program period, example, semester, the program host institution must be flexible to adjust to partner institution's academic calendars. Especially if the, the institutions are in different countries like in this case. Different countries have different academic calendars and government sanctioned public

holidays. Period that is appropriate in the host country or institution is not always appropriate in every country. So both institutions should recognize and allow important periods such as registration and final examinations to can happen on mutually agreed time periods rather than in strict compliance to the host institution.

## **References**

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