

# *Globalization, Competitiveness and Open and Distance Education: Reflections on Quality Assurance*

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*Globalization, Competitiveness and Open and Distance Education: Reflections on Quality Assurance by Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, President, The Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, to the Asian Association of Open Universities Eleventh Annual Conference "Quality Assurance in Distance and Open Learning" Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 11-14 November 1997*

## Transcript

1. Colleagues, allow me a minute to thank the organisers of this Conference and the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) for this delightful opportunity to share some thoughts with you on a subject that is becoming increasingly important for education, generally, and higher education, particularly. The AAOU which is in its eleventh year of existence, has become an important forum for distance and open education in the region. Increasingly, it is being seen as a remarkable role model for professional distance education associations across the developing world. At the same time, its members are also held in high regard by peers across the world for the single minded way in which they have gone about creating their own forum to discuss issues of importance to their professional development. We, at The Commonwealth of Learning, are immensely proud of our association with you; in one way or another we have found occasions to work with your association on matters of mutual interest to both our organisations. We would like to continue this arrangement and explore opportunities to strengthen our ties even further in the future.

2. John W. Gardner, former US Secretary of Health and Education and Professor at Stanford, remarked not too long ago that "I am entirely certain that twenty years from now we will look back at education as it is practised in most schools today and wonder that we could have tolerated anything so primitive." Professor Gardner may be a little provocative in his views, but as we near the end of this millennium and given all that we know of the way technology is influencing the learning environment, it would be difficult not to associate with his sentiments. I say this for two reasons. First, many nations of the planet are no longer in a comfortable situation where they can afford not to respond to the needs of their people for more education. Secondly, the cost of making an affirmative response on the basis of present practise

will be unbearable even for the wealthiest of nations. Since not making an affirmative response carries with it political and security risks, other means of delivering education to all those wanting it, at affordable costs, may have to be worked out. The strategy countries adopt, while local in nature, has a global dimension and will have a profound impact in the way we will teach and learn, making present practises look positively primitive.

3. Ladies and gentlemen, I have been invited to speak on Globalization, Competitiveness and Open and Distance Education: Reflections on Quality Assurance. The title is long and for me, also daunting. While I can speak with a certain level of comfort around the second part of the title, the first is a challenge. Economics has never been one of my favourite subjects. Like many of you in this audience, I have, over the years, developed a cynical distrust of economic pronouncements and pundits. You will therefore pardon me if the first part of this presentation describes perceptions rather than presents a pretentious scholarly analysis of the phenomenon called globalization. In the second and third parts of this presentation, with the benefit of my present occupation and past practical experience, I will attempt to consider the implications for the educational sector as demands are made on it by governments and individuals to enable them to be competitive in the global economy, and reflect on what it means to preserve the quality of the response we make to these demands.

4. Globalization is not new; its history is long. There are many who would say that even before the start of the First World War, aspects of economic globalization were already happening through cross border movement of goods, capital and people. Between that history and today's situation, there was also another kind of globalization - a kinder one, which enabled the establishment and growth of agencies such as the United Nations and its many sister organisations, which were development centred rather than market driven. Since the end of the Second World War, the growth of world trade, the emergence of internationalised knowledge systems, the changing patterns of communication, the penetration of technology into the social fabric of communities, production, consumption and the promotion of internationalism as a cultural value, have all become part and parcel of this socio-economic evolution of the planet. The concern, at least until the late seventies, was more social than economic. But as you all well know, the last decade has seen an acceleration of the process in another direction. The baton during this acceleration seemed to have moved away from the developmentalists to the marketers of global goods and services. These forces increasingly influence the way economies behave and sadly too they have begun to impact on national cultures. ". . . (They) Increasingly shape economies and national cultures. They present a political challenge and while (they) enable a certain universalisation of power they also concentrate such powers in the hands of a few multinationals. The new structures and protagonists of world power are relatively anonymous; they lack public accountability and often operate without controls." (Caring For the Future - a Report of the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life.) The technologies of electronics, computing and information that you and I are learning to cope with and use seem, in many ways, to be at the heart of this acceleration.

5. While most of us will admit that globalization has brought about fundamental changes in the way we do things (the movement of capital and information, the conduct of trade and finance, the consultations on science and technology, the delivery of mass media and education as well as the movement of drugs, diseases, environmental pollutants), the jury is still out on whether we are better or worse off for it. Many

of those who own and run mega, multinational corporations would say that it is an unmixed blessing. It has the potential to boost productivity and raise living standards everywhere; it will enable businesses to exploit bigger economies of scale and thereby reduce the cost of goods, and capital can be shifted to the most competitive of environments for greater return. On the other hand, critics of globalization will claim that increased competition can destroy jobs (in high wage environments), push wages down in the rich economies and in the developing ones, it will encourage a "race to the bottom" as governments reduce wages, taxes, welfare benefits and environmental controls to make themselves more competitive. Pressure to compete will reduce the ability of governments to set their own economic policies. Support for social services such as education will suffer.

6. Depending on your politics, globalization is either the best thing that has happened to human kind or it is the most selfish and self-serving manifestation of our greed. Consider some of the following, which in one way or another will have an impact on our mission as educators:

- **Deregulation** in the first instance is at the heart of economic globalization and more lately information globalization. In both these areas, especially with the arrival of the new technologies, national governments have seen a very visible reduction in their powers. A good example as most Malaysians have found out, is the movement in the value of their currency. This movement has had an unsettling impact on national economic policies. So when the Malaysian Prime Minister declares that his country is poorer by 20%, it would be naïve to believe that this loss of wealth would not have an impact on the provisions for education. Governments today are less able than before to choose policies in their own national interest. Even worst may happen. There is currently under discussion, a far more insidious arrangement that is called the Multilateral Investment Agreement or MAI. Its aim is to set binding rules to reduce government regulation and control over foreign investments. These discussions do not include the developing world, but once accepted by the club of the rich, there is a belief that the developing world will simply have to sign up if they want to play the investment game. Many non-governmental organisations fervently believe that this will further exacerbate the "race to the bottom".
- **Labour** - globalization in this sector is basically a (global) competition among work forces. Labour does not and is not allowed to migrate freely, but capital flows freely to where competent labour is cheapest and least subject to regulation. This, some would claim, has an upsetting effect on the balance between employers and employees. Globalization has made it easier for firms to shift production overseas and substitute foreign workers for local ones. The result is reflected in the greater vocationalisation of our education systems and, more importantly, puts pressure on the systems to provide retraining for those whose jobs are lost and to develop training programmes in communities where jobs move into.
- **Universalisation** of culture and knowledge. There is a fear that globalization is bringing about the dominance of knowledge by a few countries/actors and their power. These actually do replace the traditional ways of internationalising knowledge systems. Intellectual property conventions are firmly in the hands of a few. The twenty-first century is expected to be a knowledge-based one - livelihoods will be dependent on the control of airwaves, hard and software. One important

strategy to develop, maintain and frequently restore competitiveness is through more and continuous education. Our political leaders have certainly discovered this.

7. Students of international politics will know that over the last decade or so, many communities are being told by their leaders that the solution to all the problems of competitiveness of business, the crisis of unemployment and the tragedy of social exclusion and marginality will be found in education and training. In other words, education is expected to help society to solve its present difficulties and to control the profound changes that the planet is currently undergoing. Some of these expectations are justified. All other things being equal, it is the countries with the highest levels of general education and training, which seem to be the least affected by the problems of competitiveness and employment (Japan or Germany). Exhorting more and more education and providing for it are two different things altogether.

8. There are good reasons to increase the decibels for more education. Planning for competitive advantage will require a labour force that has literacy and numeracy skills beyond three to six years of primary schooling (which is the current state in most industrialised and newly industrialising countries, the situation is much grimmer in all other developing nations). Globally, some two billion people who are in today's workforce will continue to be there well into the first quarter of the next century. Their knowledge and skills will need continuous renewal. To this, we need to add a further one billion young children and adults who will require initial education and training. The level of supply (or lack) of education and training for this huge demand for initial, continuous and lifelong education using present patterns of delivery are, in the words of the much respected Vice Chancellor of the United Kingdom Open University, Sir John Daniel, at a crisis point. The challenge of providing education and training to a huge and diverse population with variety of learning goals and styles, at an acceptable cost, will require the practise of distance and open learning to be placed on the centre stage of educational systems globally. Notwithstanding the scepticism of many in the academic community, recent reports of agencies such as UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the World Bank seem to say as much. In some ways, the emergence of the new technologies may have something to do with the fascination for distance and open education.

9. In North America, the arrival of the newer technologies certainly seems to have stimulated a resurgence of interest in the use of distance education for various purposes. Almost on a daily basis, one is told that yet another web-based course is available from this or that university. Newer technologies or not, this audience is only too familiar of the success of many Commonwealth institutions in taking up the challenge of providing good quality, mass, flexible and lower cost distance education at the basic and primary (such as the Correspondence School of New Zealand), secondary (as delivered by the National Open School systems of India), technical (presented by the Open University of Sri Lanka), undergraduate (by the Open University of Hong Kong) and post-graduate (through the UKOU and Indira Gandhi National Open University) levels.

10. As the forces surrounding the educational environment impel educational institutions to move away from elitist, exclusively high cost, campus-based and faculty-centred facilities to one where the focus is the learner, access is mass, cost is low and the world is the campus, some fundamental shifts will have to take place in the methods by which teaching and learning are transacted. Accompanying these shifts will be the legitimate concerns about the quality of the venture. This is especially so in societies that have

traditionally held education in very high regard. Those of us who ventured into distance education between the mid-sixties and seventies will recollect, with pain, the stigma of the commercial correspondence schools culture that we inherited and which has taken the better part of the last 30 years to leave behind. On the basis of these three decades, let me briefly reflect on a few aspects of quality that we need to remind ourselves, even as the fascination for distance education becomes increasingly popular.

11. Technology, whether it is print or multimedia, does not teach; the techniques we adopt simply enable the delivery of teaching from narrow to mass catchments and, at the same time, shifts the responsibility of learning away from the teacher to the learner. In the process, it transforms the relationship between teachers and learners. Even while we are entering the era where both multimedia and hypermedia are bringing together, under one umbrella, the essence of print, audio and video signals, computer-assisted instruction, conference and group learning, at the heart of the teaching and learning transaction will be institutions and teachers in them. The challenge for us will be to create pedagogies of learning within which modes of delivery will contribute to effective learning. Even before the arrival of the newer technologies, communities of distance educators around the world have been at the forefront of bringing change in the educational environment. The circumstances under which practises have been developed, took into account the requirements of learners who used distance education and also needed:

- Increased and flexible access to information (isolated learners, preoccupied with other demands of living, require a variety of channels to access information on both academic and administrative matters);
- Increased and flexible opportunities for interaction between mentors and peers (the freedom from time tabled environments to conduct their learning);
- Increased student time on tasks (pacing of learning through devices that set tasks and deadlines for judicious absorption of information, skills or knowledge and completion of learning); Opportunities to control their pace of learning;
- Learning that is relevant to their daily lives (curriculum that is appropriate and sensitively transformed into learning experience);
- Greater response to their individual circumstances (mass education does not necessarily have to dehumanise the learning process); and
- Regular and sensitive encouragement to continue their learning (counselling for success).

12. By deliberate design, distance education has been instrumental in making some fundamental changes to long held beliefs about where, when and how teaching and learning should take place. The critical issue is not where the students are located, but whether they can interact with a teacher or teaching programmes. Bringing about the desired levels of interaction between students, teachers and programmes will mean subscribing to a list of good principles. Many of you know these principles but in the context of this keynote, let me reflect a little:

- Good practise recognises the need for students to be well informed about the courses that are available to them. Courses of study vary in many aspects even within a programme. Well-

designed courses make it transparent before students enrol, details such as aims, objectives, course synopsis, the position of the course in a programme, expected quantum of work, tasks that students are expected to do and criteria that will be used in recognising the completion of the course. Students need to know what they should do in order to make personal preparation before a course begins.

- Teacher learner contact is an essential part of a good educational environment. These occasions are not only good for motivating learners but also helpful in the context of overcoming learning problems. Learners are also able to use these occasions to measure their own value systems about their studies and their future.
- Active learning is healthy: Students do not learn much from memorising facts and reproducing set answers; they derive greater benefits by being active in their learning. Talking, listening, observing, discussing, writing and relating their own experiences and applying them in the context of their lessons are all part of an active learning process. Good practise in distance teaching does this effectively.
- Peer support in learning is highly beneficial. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to the ideas of others to improve thinking and increasing understanding. Learning can improve by it being a team effort rather than a collection of solo performances. Study centre facilities provide valuable opportunities for peer supported learning.
- Feedback and encouragement: Knowing what you know and what you do not know can be a focus of future learning. Regular feedback on their performance helps students learn better and deeper.
- Paced learning: Using time effectively is critical for students; what this means to teaching is a clear understanding of appropriate pacing of learning through tools such as assignments, tutorials, broadcast programs, computer conferencing etc.
- Learning pathways must be mapped to facilitate different styles of learning.

13. Besides good practise, which must be at the heart of any quality consideration in the practise of distance education, there are three other aspects of distance and open learning that are crucial to its good health. These are:

- Access: supporters of open and distance learning will claim that their educational mission is to provide access and equality of opportunity for learning especially to individuals and groups who have been denied this before. As has been argued before success in providing access is not a sufficient condition for claiming greater opportunity. "Equality of opportunity is a matter of outcomes, not merely resource availability;" in other words, providing access is merely a starting point and equality can only be achieved if the people provided with such opportunities are helped towards achieving their own goals.
- Cost considerations: The cost efficiency and effectiveness of distance education systems is an overriding concern for all of us. These considerations have a major impact on policy issues and



any measurement of the quality of a distance education system will have to take into account costs and benefits.

- Infrastructure: Delivering education to students off campus needs infrastructure that is supportive of the teaching and learning environment. This infrastructure should have among other items, the following bare essentials:

1) All those who deliver content must have the skills to use teaching methods that are resource based;

2) Such teachers must be trained and provided with technologies for the performance of their tasks;

3) Have provision for students to have access to the emerging communication and information technologies;

4) Management configures institutional resources and invests in the production of knowledge products and the pathways to deliver them; and

5) Management prepares itself to cope with the diversity in the make up of its students, their goals and the context within which they learn.

14. Finally, even as the practise of distance education moves from the margins of educational practices to centre stage its full potential to contribute to national development, equalising opportunities for all and drastically change the nature of teaching and learning still continues to be untapped. In another context, Bill Gates, in his book *The Road Ahead*, reflected that " . . . we are all beginning another great journey. We aren't sure where this one will lead us either, but again I am certain this revolution will touch even more lives and take us all further". It seems to me that how much further we can go with the delivery of high quality distance education is capped not by technology, not even other resources but by our own professionalism and imagination. Simply relying on present habits or knowledge of instruction and technologies will not be enough. We will be required to put in place, organisations and people who can deliver courses at any location chosen by the learner. We need partnerships and associations, which will work in a linked network of providers, thereby providing unlimited choice to the learner. We need new strategies for course development and certification. And we need arrangements that will link students among themselves; link students and tutors and tutors and tutors; we need a fresh look at our curriculum and we need a curriculum that is dynamic - not one that confines learners to fixed points, but one that is seamless and open. I am told that we have the knowledge, experience and skills to do all these. Crucially, we also have today, the technology to enable us to achieve these ideals. What is needed is the vision to make it all happen.