Distance Education: Status and Issues

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The development of open and distance learning during the last 25 years has been described as a response to increased needs and demands on the educational sector by population growth and economic and societal necessities. In some, primarily developed, countries, distance education has a long and well established tradition - in Australia and Canada, for example, two countries with small populations dispersed over wide areas, educational authorities at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels have, for almost a century, responded to the challenge of providing education and training for small, isolated groups of people by encouraging them to learn at a distance from major centres, to acquire credentials while remaining at home. In the developing world, the tradition of open and distance learning is neither so long nor so well established but, increasingly, bolstered by experience in both developing and developed countries, governments and the institutions they support have adopted open and distance learning methods to meet the demands of their people and of the world in which they live.

It is at a commonplace that levels of educational attainment for both individuals and societies are closely linked to personal and societal wealth and welfare and, that as societies develop with greater speed, governments are driven to attempt to provide greater levels of access to education and training for their people. This has, however, occurred at a time when the availability of education and training has increasingly been demanded by other than the traditional school and university age groups and when the cost of providing education and training has grown to hitherto unimaginable levels. The challenge that faces governments around the world, a common problem in developed as well as developing

societies, is to provide much higher levels of education and training to people of all ages at a cost that governments can afford. Education and training have become a continuous, lifelong activity and societies and the governments that represent them must respond to this situation.

Increasingly, assisted by developments in learning technologies and by advances in instructional methodologies, governments and the institutions they support have turned to open and distance education as one means of response. This is a world that has been and continues to be transformed by new developments. From the world of correspondence institutions in which students were sent course materials through the mail, studied them, were provided with tutors' comments by the same means and, eventually if they persevered, took final examinations, open and distance learning has come to the point where technological aids of various kinds can give students in huge numbers the ability to receive advice, to register in courses, to receive materials and tutorial and other support, all through electronic means. Faster, more versatile, more interactive technologies have the potential to become, in some situations already are becoming, the backbone for major teaching and learning transactions for great numbers of students.

This is a situation that will occur throughout the world. Courses, even entire programmes, will be available through the Internet. Students will be able to simultaneously undertake work from several institutions in different parts of the world and will, in time, wish to bring these diverse learning experiences together to make up coherent credentials. The situation increasingly described as the 'virtual university' is coming to pass, presenting as it does so a series of major challenges to governments and to traditional institutions whose structures and modes of operation are ill equipped to deal with such an educational and social revolution as this idea implies. The evidence for this is already appearing and becomes apparent from a review of educational practice, particularly at the tertiary level, in many parts of the world.

Some examples of this will indicate what I mean. I mentioned earlier the long tradition of distance education in Australia and developments there are instructive. In recent years, Australian institutions have been among the world's most aggressive vendors of educational products at home and overseas. A multitude of technical and further education colleges, universities, professional associations and others are engaged in domestic and foreign distance education provision. Open Learning Australia acts as publicist, promoter and broker of distance education courses for its members. There is evidence of considerable activity and vitality in Australian open and distance learning, perhaps, however, diminished by a marked lack of co-operation among the institutional providers.

A similar situation is evident in Canada, a country that I earlier linked to Australia as one with a long and solid tradition of distance education. Canada, with two strong English-speaking distance teaching institutions, Athabasca University and the BC Open Learning Agency, and one French-speaking institution, the Télé-Université de Quebec, as well as a

large number of dual-mode universities and colleges, has no such co-ordinating agency as Open Learning Australia; but its institutions are, in many respects, at the forefront of developments in open and distance learning. The example of the federally funded Telelearning Research Network at Simon Fraser University with its 'virtual university' linking institutions and companies in most Canadian provinces is evidence of this.

Such examples can be multiplied around the developed world where open and distance learning techniques and practices are expanding and developing with extraordinary speed and, we hope, effectiveness. These developments are not, however, uniform and, even in countries where major open universities and other distance teaching institutions have been or are being developed, the concerns of those involved with the development of their programmes and structures are often quite dissimilar to those of institutions in Europe, North America or Australia. The example of sub-Saharan Africa presents the most striking evidence of the gaps between those countries and institutions that are well provided for and those that are not. The 1996 Human Development Report noted that, in this region, roughly half the children entering Grade 1 finished Grade 5, a 50% attrition rate, and that some 80 million children have never entered or have dropped out of school. The same report indicated that the best provided parts of Africa may have 2,100 university students per 100,000 of population while, in the worst-off areas, the number was less than 16. Distance teaching institutions, which provide perhaps the major hope for underpinning the kind and rapidity of educational development that is vital to the region, must be concerned not with technological advances but with providing access and instruction at a very basic level. Thus, print materials not computer networking is a primary issue; trained academic and support staff, workable study centres, functioning communications systems are all necessary but frequently absent requirements.

The issues that need to be addressed by institutions in Africa are not primarily technological ones, are indeed the same as those that dominate discussions in other parts of the developing world, even in the mega-universities that have been established particularly in Asia in the last 20 years. The issue of technology is now and will become, as access to educational technologies becomes more readily available, a vital one; but the high cost of investing in its use and the equally high rate of obsolescence, the lack of experience in its use and the resulting need for extensive and expensive training often dictate that technological solutions to educational problems should be delayed while more 'low-tech' but more effective solutions to education and training problems are implemented. In essence, the issues that need to be addressed are those that should preoccupy educational institutions involved in open and distance learning in any part of the developing or the developed world. They are, it should perhaps be noted, those that were identified as paramount by the two volumes emerging from a regional seminar on distance education sponsored by the Asian Development Bank and held here in Bangkok almost ten years ago in November 1986.

Briefly, these issues are as follows:

1. The Nature of Learners

I earlier alluded to the change in the range of learners from conventional school and college age students to students who expect to be provided with learning opportunities throughout their lives. The idea of lifelong learning is not new - the Greeks knew all about it and based their culture on it - but it seems to have been rediscovered - with, one hopes, beneficial effects - in the late twentieth century; and institutions, particularly those involved in open and distance learning, are being required to ensure that their programmes, at whatever level they are offered, have the accessibility and flexibility to allow learners of different ages and needs to participate. Thus, the needs of full- and part-time students, of school age and older students, of handicapped and disabled students must be addressed as fully as possible.

2. Learning Support Systems

The difference between correspondence and distance education lies in the support provided to learners operating at a distance from the source of instruction. It is a truism among distance educators that the quality of student support can be measured, at least in part by completion rates and there is much evidence for the view that high quality support systems are essential to learner success. These systems include, primarily, the provision of high quality learning materials and tutorial support but also access to library and laboratory facilities, advising and counselling services, communication with other students, etc. Such support systems provide the kind of enhancements to individuals' learning that is often essential to the success of even the most independent learners.

3. Learning Materials

The provision of high quality learning materials to open and distance learning students is the first requirement for any institution even though the existence of appropriate support systems is of almost equal importance. The essential characteristic of such materials is that they be carefully designed to meet the needs of the students and of the curriculum that they are pursuing and that they use instructional media that are most suitable to the needs and skills of students and to the requirements of the curriculum. The development of such materials is a highly skilled activity on the part not only of teaching faculty but also of instructional designers and other professionals. Training of such people must be a high priority for open and distance learning institutions even if alternative solutions to the development of original materials are adopted. The principal alternative is to buy or lease materials developed elsewhere that are usable or adaptable for students in another institution. Clearly, materials acquired from other institutions are not always appropriate for reasons of content, culture, format and so on; but equally there are good reasons why it can be an appropriate choice in cases where material is not, for example, culturally

sensitive, in which case cost, speed of availability, access to wider educational considerations, etc. are important and relevant considerations.

A final note in this respect relates to the increasing tendency of open and distance learning institutions to collaborate with other, similar institutions in the development of course materials. Although perhaps emerging primarily from considerations of cost in institutions recognising that the high and increasing costs of materials development are unacceptable, the emergence of consortia to produce course materials jointly is an important development in the growth of open and distance learning institutions in the last few years.

4. Management

One of the weaknesses of many open and distance learning institutions is that, until recently, all or most of the people who managed them came to them through conventional institutions and had, until moving into what was essentially a new form of education, experience only in rather different institutions. While those of us who have made this transition from conventional to distance teaching institutions might argue that our performance has not been altogether unacceptable, there is nevertheless a need to develop managers with a clear understanding of the unique requirements of open and distance learning institutions and programmes. The view that open and distance education is an industrialised system that requires industrial rather than educational management is an exaggeration. It cannot be denied, however, that the need to manage the development and production of course materials according to predetermined and inflexible schedules, to design and deliver student support services in clearly defined ways, to ensure that activities like registration, record-keeping and examinations are carried out with precision imposes imperatives on managers of open and distance learning institutions that are quite distinct from those of conventional institutions.

5. Quality Assurance

Ultimately, the primary issue for open and distance learning institutions, as for conventional ones, is quality and the assurance that students are being provided with the best possible education or training with the highest possible standards. While, in the main, measures of quality and the means taken to secure them are the same as or very similar to those adopted for conventional programmes, there are differences in measuring success and quality in open and distance learning. This is well illustrated by reference to a well-established measure of success and completion rates. These rates for distance teaching institutions are affected by factors that are often quite different from those that operate in conventional institutions - that is, the main factor affecting completion is not simply or even primarily the provision of good well supported instruction. Distance students are typically part-time while working and maintaining families so that their study is merely one among many heavy demands on their time; the reasons for studying are often quite different from those of conventional, full-time students; and the desired outcomes are also

frequently at variance with those of full-time students. All of these factors can seriously affect completion. The key seems to be that, in institutions like the United Kingdom Open University and the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong where many students regard success as a route to personal and professional advancement, completion rates are often at least comparable to those of conventional institutions.

In providing quality education and training, however, open and distance education institutions need to be able to ensure that the materials they offer to their students are of the highest possible quality and that the support - in the form of advice, counselling and tutoring as well as more mechanical forms of support such as prompt provision of information, of materials, of continuous assessment and of results - are also of the highest quality. It is important to note that the mere provision of materials without adequate support is almost certainly a recipe for failure in this endeavour. Institutions entering the field have to ensure that their course development or review procedures ensure that the results are satisfactory and that measures of quality are in place for academic as for support staff.

There are, of course, other vital questions to be considered in setting up and administering open and distance education programmes, particularly those on the scale being contemplated by this workshop. Principal among these is the ever present question of cost and cost effectiveness; but this and other major issues will be covered by the experts' papers that you will hear during the next few days.