Can ICT support human resource development? Drawing on our Common Wealth

Video Presentation

Public Administration in Very Small States, Governance and Development, 24 April 2013, London, United Kingdom

Can ICT support human resource development? Drawing on our Common Wealth

By Professor Asha Kanwar
Commonwealth of Learning

Transcript

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be 'virtually' present at this high-level conference on 'Public Administration in very Small States' and I thank Max Everest-Phillips, the Director, Governance and Institutional Development Division for the invitation.

The Commonwealth of Learning or COL has its headquarters in Vancouver, Canada and a regional office for Asia in New Delhi. Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance education and Information and Communication Technologies for expanding access to education and training. So it is appropriate that I use this familiar distance education technology to reach you.

I start with the question—can technology support human resource development? The conventional methods of education and training within the classroom are inadequate to reach dispersed populations who may be spread out across various atolls and islands.

So yes, ICT can play a role as more options are available to our citizens ─ mobile telephones are the fastest growing sector globally with 6.8 billion cell phones in use today. Community radio has had a second coming in countries such as India, Nigeria and Bangladesh as the governments are proactively awarding licenses. TV and Internet are increasingly available.

Its not just about access to ICT. There are the other issues of connectivity, relevant content in the local languages and culture, which determine who can or cannot have access such as women and marginalized communities. In addition we have the issues of economic viability, such as the questions of who will pay for the ICT systems? As a UNDP Human Development report points out 'the belief that there is a technological silver bullet that can 'solve' illiteracy, ill health or economic failure reflects scant understanding of real poverty'. As we know ICT do enable change and add value to the development process. But by themselves they do not create the development process. ICT strategies are only effective, sustainable and worth the effort if they are integrally linked to a broader, more comprehensive education and development strategy.

One effective ICT strategy for education and training is distance learning. Distance learning has opened up access to education to millions of learners across the Commonwealth and is an option worth considering if we wish to close the gaps of access, costs, equity and quality.

Many governments across the Commonwealth are adopting distance learning to reach the unreached. One compelling reason for distance learning is lower costs. The annual cost per student at the Korean National Open University is $186 as compared to nearly $3000 for a campus student. Similarly the annual costs for STOU students are $226 compared to $876 in a campus university. In short, distance learning can cost one third of what a student would pay in a campus university.

What of quality? The Open University of the UK, a distance learning institution ranked fifth among the 100 universities surveyed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of the UK and was one rank higher than Oxford University. So the same learning outcomes can be achieved using distance learning approaches.

Let us take up the question with which we started: can ICT support human resource development? The answer is yes distance learning and the appropriate use of ICT can support human resource development. COL has developed two high quality distance education courses that you could use to support public administration training in the very Small States of the Commonwealth.

One is an Executive Masters of Public Administration which is a distance learning programme and can be offered by any tertiary institution in your country or region. This programme can help public service officers gain a high level of competency and global outlook. The courses have been developed by academics and professionals from top Commonwealth institutions. This is a flexible programme that allows the learners to study at their own pace and convenience and at affordable costs. My colleague who leads on this is Prof Madhulika Kaushik from India.

The programme includes courses on Public Policy, Development Planning and Administration, Policy Analysis and Implementation, Contemporary Administrative Systems and Disaster Management, to name a few.

The technologies that are used to deliver this programme are print, audio, video, teleconferencing and elearning. The context determines the technology to be deployed.

So far nine partner institutions in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Mauritius, Ghana, Nigeria, Jamaica and Guyana are offering this programme.

The second Programme that COL has developed in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat is the Diploma in Legislative Drafting. This could be taken as a refresher course to enhance professional skills or as a qualification. The courses include Introduction to Legislative Drafting, Instructions and Compliance, Structuring Legislation and a project to develop drafting skills.

The technologies used to deliver this course are print, materials available on CD-ROM or an entirely online course for those who have computers and connectivity.

The five partner institutions which are offering this course are University of the South Pacific, Vanuatu Campus, Athabasca University, Canada; the National Open University of Nigeria; the Indira Gandhi National Open University, India and the University of Derby, UK. These resources are our common wealth and available to you.

Another, valuable resource is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth or VUSSC. All the 32 small states are members of this consortium. The courses I have just described could be offered through this network or through the existing tertiary institutions in your countries.In addition, you could use some of the courses which have been developed by, for and of the small states under this initiative. I only refer to two which may be of interest: Disaster Management and Business and Entrepreneurship. There are several other relevant courses developed by VUSSC that are available free on the COL website. My colleague John Lesperance from the Seychelles leads this initiative.

As you have seen, appropriate technologies and available courses can help you promote human resource development in your countries. COL is your organisation and it works for you. It is small and flexible and can respond readily to your needs. COL is a world class source of expertise in distance and technology-based approaches and in these times of economic difficulty, these approaches will become more important than ever before.

Finally, how can COL help? One, COL can help you adopt and adapt the course materials to suit your specific needs. Two, it can provide the technical advice to make decisions about the deployment of appropriate technologies and three, it can help you develop the corpus of capacity within your country to make these efforts sustainable.

With that, I thank you for your kind attention.