

Distance Education: Crossing the Distance in the Commonwealth



12th Annual Canadian Association for Distance Education Conference

Moncton, N.B., May 22-25, 1996

"DISTANCE EDUCATION: CROSSING THE DISTANCE IN THE COMMONWEALTH"

By

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1. Preamble: The Commonwealth And Its Demography

The Commonwealth of nations is home to 1.2 billion people; one out of four human beings on earth lives in one of the 53 Commonwealth countries. Almost half these nations are small with populations under a million while three (or four) of them are among the nine populous countries of the world. Except for the richer countries of the Commonwealth (Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore) which are aging, the others have populations that are young (those under 15 far out number those above 65); those with younger populations are also among the poorest having a higher percentage of illiteracy and employing the working populations in less skilled and low paying jobs. The need for more education and training in these less well endowed nations is clearly obvious.

By and large, this group of nations subscribe to decent and participatory government, preservation of human dignity, improving the health and well being of its individual peoples and sharing of experience with member Commonwealth countries.

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Through their joint declaration in Harare, where they met in October 1991, **Heads of Governments of the Commonwealth** declared among other things the **following four principles** which are most relevant to our work as individuals concerned with the education of our people:

- . the promotion of sustainable development and the alleviation of poverty in the countries of the Commonwealth through:
 - . a stable international economic framework;
 - . sound economic management;
 - . effective population policies and programmes; and
 - . sound management of technological change;
- . the protection and promotion of fundamental political values;
- . equality for women, so that they can exercise their full and equal rights; and provision of universal access to education for the population of (their) countries.

In my position as an international civil servant of the Commonwealth and head of one of its major agencies, the fourth principle of the declaration is particularly important. It is important to note that in every one of their last four meetings, Commonwealth Heads of Governments have consistently placed tremendous value on the role of education in bringing about change to the lives of their people. The enormously successful economies of Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and more recently Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia have all become classic examples of nations moving from being the poor houses of the planet to being its powerhouses - almost all of it on the back of successful and sound educational policies. Without adequate education where is the intellect to:

- . increase wealth and well being;
- . participate effectively in democratic forums;
- . contribute to, derive benefit from and manage a nation's economy and resources;
- . take personal responsibility in a civil society; and
- . contribute to a sustainable development?

While the desire to provide more education to their peoples is clearly there, the magnitude of the task is daunting; there is also the further constraint of a lack of fiscal, physical and human resources, especially if this task is pursued by adopting traditional methods of delivering education. The use of Distance Education and the application of the newer technologies are seen as obvious solutions but there are some difficulties to overcome before they can be applied on a sustainable basis.

2. The Distance Between Demand And Supply

Consider this; even as we approach the twenty-first century, levels of inequality in terms of educational provision between those who have and those who do not continue to be appalling. There are roughly 900 million illiterates in the world; most of them are found in the developing parts of the Commonwealth and about 65% of them are women and girls. Approximately 130 million children around the ages of 6 and 11 are deprived of schooling; the Commonwealth is home to a large proportion. In some parts of the

Commonwealth, the average school expectancy of an individual is about 350 days (as compared to Canada where a child can enjoy up to 3,100 days of school). In higher education, the disparity is even greater. For instance, in Canada there are roughly 5,102 post-secondary students per 100,000 head of population compared to say 16 in Mozambique, the newest member of the Commonwealth. By the year 2020 it is expected that the nations of the world may have to provide up to 150 million university places just to maintain the average 12% participation rate in the relevant age cohort. This projection for post-secondary education does not include new demands from countries like Mozambique which in the next twenty-five years have a right to aspire for the same level of participation as the more developed economies. Whether it is for purposes of literacy, schooling and college education, retraining, reskilling and upgrading of the workforce, the demand will clearly increase.

On the supply side, even with increased provision for the education sector (in the budget of nations), places available in schools and colleges, in polytechnics and universities in proportional terms will not increase significantly. Besides grim numbers there are other qualitative shortcomings. The list of the shortcomings is long but

a few that you will be sensitive to include: poorly trained and inadequate numbers of faculty; untrained or poorly trained teachers; an inadequate supply of teaching and learning materials; and ill equipped libraries and laboratories. To many of you, it will be quite obvious that if the educational needs and aspirations of a larger part of the Commonwealth are to be achieved, then solutions such as the ones provided by distance education methods will have to be considered. That some of the biggest and fastest growing open universities of the world are located in the developing part of the world attests to the attraction that distance education offers to governments hard pressed to meet the aspirations of their people for education but constrained from doing so by a combination of complex factors. Wishing to take the distance education route and being able to do well in this efforts are two different things. There are some other challenges.

3. The Distance Between Knowing What And How

Many of us in this audience, I am certain, are comfortable talking of fourth and fifth generation distance education. The electronic superhighway, virtuality, distributed classrooms are the buzzwords of the twenty-first century distance educator. In a recent OECD report, it was suggested that those wishing to provide distance education in the coming decade must recognise:

- . that all those who deliver content to the distant learner must use teaching methods that are resource based and require students to take responsibilities for their own learning;
- . that such teachers are expected to use the technologies of electronic networks, CD-ROM's, telephones, computers, and a range of emerging multi-media tools as part of their professional skills;
- . that institutions must provide all teaching staff with configured work stations located in their offices and linked to libraries, knowledge bases, media centres colleagues and students;
- . that students must be mature as independent learners and need to have access to technology and must be technology literate;
- . that students have the capacity to pay part of the cost of their learning;

. that the management of institutions reconfigure institutional resources and invest in the production of knowledge products and pathways to deliver them; and

. that management prepares itself to coping with a diversity in the make up of its students, their goals and the context within which they learn.

The smaller countries of the Commonwealth, especially many in Africa, the South Pacific, the Caribbean and South Asia ,are quite far from utilising the interactive media that the OECD report describes. However, it would be incorrect to believe that their marginalisation will be in perpetuity; sooner rather than later, familiarity with and the ability to use technology for teaching and or learning is expected to become part of the educational culture across most parts of the Commonwealth. But "sooner" may not be quick enough.

Except for the big (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nigeria) or the well endowed (Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand), the supply of individuals to create, manage and sustain distance education ventures of even the second generation, in all of its complexities, is in very short supply. In the last seven years, COL has trained some 600 individuals in one or another aspect of distance education. We get more requests for training than any other type of assistance from member countries and quite clearly investment in training must be seen as the most important investment nations can make to achieve a sustainable situation in distance education. In a review of training needs conducted in 1989, COL identified 78 different tasks for which training has to be designed. More new items will have to be added to this list during 1996 and every subsequent year ahead as the distance education community moves from traditional to more modern means of creating and developing courses; exploring new vehicles of delivery; and introducing more efficient and effective means of learner support.

4. The Distance Between Resources Needed And Available

Whether the intention is to practice first or fifth generation distance education, apart from the basic human resource, a few other resources are also needed. In Britain, it takes a first class letter less than 1 day to arrive at its destination; in Malaysia it takes about 3 and in parts of the Pacific weeks rather than days would be

a reasonable description. In Australia, for every head of population there are 2 radio receivers, 1.4 television sets and 2 telephone sets, on the other hand, in Mozambique, there is perhaps 1 radio set for every 40 individuals; 1 television per two thousand head of population and perhaps 1 telephone per thousand population. To support

a good distance education system we should also take a look at the availability of print shops; count the number of photocopiers, computers and modems.

5. Distance Of Capacity

Distance education makes rigorous demands not only on learners but also on those who provide access to such self-learning. Good practice in distance education calls for:

. commitment on the part of institutions to excellence of teaching for all of its students through pedagogic strategies that will meet the special demands of its clients;

. effective internal decision-making procedures for the setting up of standards, goals and priorities as well as the periodic self evaluation of the system for accountabilities to learners,

. flexible and client centered policies relating to enrollments, recognition of prior learning, a seamless arrangement for learning progression to take place, sensitive planning and management of arrangements required for a systems based education especially a requirement of the system for up front capitalization and learner support systems throughout the catchment,

It is the responsibility of institutional leadership to ensure that these factors are accounted for and what seems to be emerging is the short supply of such leadership in many jurisdictions. This lack of national capacity to support open and distance learning is by far the most important impediment for the rapid progress of Open and Distance Learning systems throughout the Commonwealth.

6. A Question Of Commitment

One of the most important challenges we face in *creating learning opportunities for all* is the lack of firm commitment by many governments to this principle. Where there is a clear and unequivocal commitment, the "trade" flourishes as in the case of India. By the end of its next planning period, India hopes to have no less than 12 to 15 open universities, the country would have brought almost all of its external studies departments of the conventional universities into some kind of a "control" to ensure that quality and students interest are protected, there will be available dedicated learning channels via the country's satellite and other communication systems. We see a similar situation in South Korea and Thailand.

A clear political commitment has resulted in an effective provision. At the other end of the spectrum are many jurisdictions in other parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America where such commitments are not clear and this in turn is reflected in the poor staffing, poor materials, even poorer learner support systems for distance teaching initiatives. Ultimately, this has led to massive incompleteness rates, learner frustration, staff disillusionment and political disappointments. Would it surprise anyone if distance education withers away under such circumstances?

There is also a need to educate and urge many international agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP, the African Development Bank, and the national donor agencies to channel a proportion of their assistance in promoting distance education. Governments, international and other donor agencies can be helpful in the following ways:

. creating policy frame work that will enable open and distance learning to become an important pillar of a nation's educational initiative (India, Southern Africa);

. encouraging minimal standards of good practice for those involved in the delivery of open and distance learning;

. creating pathways for the free and easy movement of credits and credentials across the educational system (Australia); and

. (international donor and lending agencies) requiring recipient governments to include open and distance learning provisions into the educational planning framework of a country.

7. A Role For An International Agent

In 1988, 53 Heads of Governments of the Commonwealth considered that there was a role for a multilateral agency to speak for and promote distance education around the Commonwealth. The decision was arrived at after much debate and discussion. Those of you who have subjected "collaborative ventures in education" to the scrutiny of scholarship will understand when I say that bringing collaboration among educational institutions is a lot more difficult than it may appear to be. It has become more so in the last decade than at any time before, given the market driven agenda that has been set for institutions by their benefactors. Notwithstanding these difficulties there are opportunities for collaboration and for an international agent to mediate such ventures. Some of these opportunities which we as a community can make happen include:

- . developing grassroots professional associations; many of the new distance education associations in the less developed parts of the Commonwealth can benefit enormously from your experience and knowledge in the establishment and management of professional bodies;
- . structuring informal networks around themes such as research, technology, training, instruction, etc.;
- . influencing the direction of instructional design in material development in order for it to travel comfortably;
- . creating opportunities for the mobility of credits;
- . sharing information, techniques, knowledge and a passion for educating the world; and
- . helping in the development of a global campus without walls.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Commonwealth is about sharing and learning from each other; the Commonwealth of Learning could not have happened but for the vision of many pioneers of distance and open learning who saw in this organisation an opportunity to truly maximise the potential of distance education to share and learn. Our collective imagination and generosity will be the two limiting factors in taking an agenda for the Commonwealth of Learning further.