The Sustainable Development of Open and Distance Learning

The Sustainable Development of Open and Distance Learning. Commonwealth of Learning, Open and Distance Learning for Development, The role of ODL in delivering MDGs, Vancouver, 6 May 2005

After-dinner remarks by: Sir John Daniel, President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning

Introduction

It is a pleasure to be with you again. After your friendly reception yesterday I feel you are all old friends. However, after the friendly reception you gave me yesterday I may be testing your friendship by appearing before you again. You may be asking yourselves: do we really have to listen to this old ODL warhorse another time?

Some people think that after-dinner speakers are superfluous. When Nero was emperor in Rome he distracted the people with shows in the Coliseum such as contests between gladiators and fights - if you could call them that - between Christians and lions. On one such occasion the Coliseum was full of the Roman masses, shouting with anticipation as a group of Christians were pushed into the arena.

A pride of lions was let in through another door and bounded towards the Christians. At this moment one of the Christians was seen to stride forward towards the leading lion, which stopped in surprise, and to speak to it.

At this the lion growled and, with all the other lions, lay down in the sand. The crowd howled in disappointment but the lions would not budge. Eventually Nero called the Christian over to the Imperial Box. 'What did you say to the lion', he asked. 'I told him that there would be a speech after the meal', the Christian replied.

Your entertainment this evening was meant to be Canada's Minister of International Cooperation, the Honourable Aileen Carroll. However, with great regret Ms Carroll recently had to cancel her trip to Vancouver. You may know that in the Canadian Parliament the opposition is trying to defeat our minority government, so politicians and ministers cannot risk being too far from Ottawa.

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You would have enjoyed the Minister, who has done much to raise the profile of overseas aid in Canada and is strong supporter of COL. Please blame Helen for imposing me on you instead.

She asked for a speech after the meal so I shall give you one. Furthermore, since you have been working so hard for us over the last two days I feel that I must connect with the subject of the Institute, rather than simply tell a few jokes and sit down.

But I am pleased to speak to you after a good dinner because, as Dr Samuel Johnson once said, one of the disadvantages of wine is that is makes you mistake words for thought. For the speaker on an occasion like this that is actually an advantage.

I have given my remarks the title The Sustainable Development of Open and Distance Learning. I began yesterday morning by talking about development but since then Madhu Singh, Mohan Menon and others have widened the context to sustainable development.

Education for Development

During my three-and-a-bit years at UNESCO we were given the responsibility for leading the preparations for the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, which began this year. I understand the concept of education for sustainable development to be an attempt to blend the drive for environmental education, which was given new momentum at the Biodiversity Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, with the campaign for Education for All that was re-energised at the Dakar World Forum in 2000.

When asked to express it simply I say that education for sustainable development is about education for development - but for development that must be sustainable.

I stress this point because, now that open and distance learning has become respectable and valued, we who earn our living by promoting it can easily tend to think of it as an end in itself. In a civilised society, of course, education is an end in itself and I subscribe fully to that. But education is also, for much of the world's population, the route to development.

Yesterday you all seemed to agree with Amartya Sen that development is the enhancement of freedom. You accept that the measure of development is the extent to which people enjoy greater freedom on more dimensions. You also agree that freedom is the means of development, for the most powerful force in the development of families, communities, societies and nations, is the free agency of free people.

The Iron Triangle

Open and distance learning is important because it allows education to break out of the iron triangle that has constrained its impact throughout history. I mean the iron triangle defined by the vectors of access,

quality and cost. Most educators have assumed explicitly - and the general public implicitly - that education is a zero-sum game of these variables.

On this assumption, increasing access to education will lower quality and raise overall cost. Similarly, raising quality will increase costs and therefore reduce access. The iron triangle has created in the public mind an insidious link between quality and exclusivity in education.

The Resolution of Open and Distance Learning

I consider that the great achievement of distance education has been to break this insidious link. There is now solid evidence that appropriate use of open and distance learning allows you to increase access, improve quality and cut cost - all at the same time. This is an educational revolution with the potential dramatically to accelerate the development that will enhance the freedoms of the mass of humankind.

For this reason the theme of this institute is of vital importance. Because it has such potential for good, open and distance learning is not just any innovation that can be pursued in a haphazard manner and abandoned when the going gets tough. Because ODL can engage very large numbers of people it cannot be considered as an educational experiment. We do not experiment on live human beings.

Put the other way round, it is very important that we design our institutions, programmes and projects in open and distance learning to be sustainable. We owe this to the people who entrust their education and training to ODL. We should also remember that, despite its success, the reputation of distance education is not yet so high in the public mind that it can withstand too many stories of institutional failure.

Factors in Success and Sustainability

For the rest of these minutes in the lions' den I shall reflect on my own experience of being a student, an educational technologist, a manager and a leader in distance education systems. I debated whether to structure this experience by going through the institutions with which I have been associated and drawing lessons from each of them, or by taking particular themes and clothing them with the flesh of experience. I shall do a bit of both.

Note also that I shall inevitably recall as many failures and weaknesses as successes and strengths - so keep in mind my earlier comment that open and distance learning is a successful revolution with world-changing implications. However, it has been well said that experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted to get. We learn more from our mistakes than our successes.

For this reasons I particularly enjoyed working with Professor Geoff Peters at the UK Open University because he is a systems specialist with a special interest in systems failures. Whenever we made a cock-up he usually cheered us up again by showing us what we could learn from it.

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Some of you may have been at the rather hapless congress of the International Council for Distance Education in Pennsylvania in 1997. I remember that as each day passed, and more wheels fell off the organisation of the conference, Geoff became happier and happier because of all the material on systems failure that it provided for him.

What are the ingredients of sustainability in open and distance learning? I shall identify six and illustrate them from experience.

Clarity of Purpose and Intention

First, I stress clarity of purpose and intention. A good example is the UK Open University. Walter Perry, the founding Vice-Chancellor, was clear about two things. He intended to operate at scale and to create an institution of high academic quality. He therefore ignored the civil servants who told him to do a concept-testing pilot project with a few hundred students and admitted a first cohort of 25,000 students instead.

He also hired first-rate young academics with research interests even though the political party in opposition was advising enquirers not to go and work for this oddball institution since they planned to abolish it.

To be clear about purposes and intentions sounds very obvious, but there are plenty of recent examples of failure to do this in a rational way. Most of those who launched into e-learning during the dot-com frenzy of 1999-2000 thought that they were going to capture a mass market of learners as the UKOU had done. They failed to do so because they had not thought sufficiently about the demand for the service in the environments that they were working in.

They had also failed to note the obvious point that using mass media tends to bring you mass audiences whereas using individualised media tend to bring you individuals.

How long these lessons took to sink in depended mainly on the degree of involvement of governments. Projects with ministerial backing, like the UK e-Universities project that was axed only last year after a lot of money had been wasted, took longer to adjust to reality than those launched by institutions or by the private sector, which had to do the sums about supply and demand much more quickly.

Economic Structure

That leads to my second ingredient of sustainability: economic viability. Walter Perry went for scale at the UKOU because he understood intuitively that he could not afford to produce courses of the quality he wanted unless he amortised the cost of producing them over large numbers of students.

Many of the open and distance learning systems around the world that have achieved high reputations for quality, like the UKOU and the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University operate at scale. Furthermore,

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their growth to scale had the effect of making them progressively less dependent on government financing, since even low fees generate plenty of revenue when hundreds of thousands of students are paying them.

I particularly admire the smaller open universities, such as Athabasca University and the Open University of Hong Kong, that have achieved economic viability and low dependence on public funds with enrolments of less than 30,000. They have had to pay particular attention to the size of their curriculum and the costs of course production.

A good example of a programme that foundered on the question of economic structure was the United States Open University (USOU) launched by the UKOU in 1998 and closed in 2002, even though it had already achieved US national accreditation and was on the verge of achieving regional accreditation.

The story of the USOU teaches us several lessons about sustainability. However, the main reason the UKOU closed USOU was that the breakeven point, when the expenditure by the UKOU on the programme would have been matched by the revenues generated in the USA, was too distant in time for a public institution to accept. It is an interesting question whether USOU would have succeeded had it been in the private sector.

The UKOU hoped to launch USOU for around $25 million, which equalled what the University of Phoenix was then spending annually on marketing alone. If the owners of USOU had been able to make a larger upfront investment, notably in marketing, it is possible that the institution could have grown to breakeven much more quickly and might still be around today.

Institutional Structure

My third factor in sustainability is institutional structure. Experience has taught me that institutional autonomy is pretty crucial to long-term success. I judge, for example, that Quebec's Télé-université has failed to achieve its potential because it is part of the Université du Québec system. The fact that it is now being absorbed into the Université du Québec à Montréal rather proves the point.

In making many decisions about the Télé-université the University of Quebec system has had more regard for the comfort of the other campuses in the network than for the interests of the population that the Télé-université might serve. I recall, for instance, that the representative from the Université du Québec à Montréal on the Télé-université Board opposed my own appointment to the Télé-université staff in 1973 on the grounds that she did not want to see the Télé-université hire competent people.

Institutional structure is a particularly tricky issue for dual mode institutions. It is still, sadly, rather rare to find arrangements between the mother institution and its distance education arm that are fully satisfactory. In setting up its state open universities India clearly made the judgement that the correspondence branches of the existing universities could not deliver distance education on the scale and of the quality that the country wanted.

Some of the state open universities are doing better than others and it seems that the Karnataka Open University, which is the correspondence branch of the University of Mysore rebadged, has had more difficulty achieving quality and impact than institutions like Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) that started with a clean slate and then had some brilliant vice-chancellors like Professor Takwale - here present.

On the other hand, alliances can be vital. Another interpretation of the failure of the UKOU's United States Open University programme is that the UKOU ignored its own principle of working with partners when it went overseas, as it had done very successfully in Central Europe, Singapore, Hong Kong and Ethiopia.

To be accurate the UKOU did seek partners in the USA, but succumbed to what I call the 'Groucho Marx' syndrome. Groucho Marx once remarked that he would not want to be a member of any club that would accept him.

In the same way the UKOU felt rather superior to the institutions that were eager to partner with it, but then found that those US universities that it would have liked to partner with were rather too arrogant. So it decided to go it alone and create USOU as a distinct entity. Despite good leadership USOU could not raise its student numbers quickly enough to provide a convincing financial scenario for its paymaster, the UKOU.

Leadership

Leadership is my fourth ingredient of sustainability. It is striking how the best-known open universities all had outstanding leaders in their foundation years. I think of Walter Perry at the UKOU, Wichit Srisa An at STOU in Thailand, Ram Reddy at both the Andhra Pradesh OU and IGNOU, and Ram Takwale at both YCMOU in Maharashtra and IGNOU.

Good leadership is also crucial at a time of change. I admired the way that my predecessor at COL, Raj Dhanarajan, laid the groundwork for the Hong Kong Open Learning Institute so well that it achieved university status in record time in S-W Tam's presidency.

Good leadership can also reinvigorate institutions that are languishing or underperforming. Here I think of how Dominique Abrioux took over at Athabasca University when it was under threat and turned it into the university with the highest student ratings in Alberta. Similarly the Allama Iqbal OU in Pakistan is making great strides under the vice-chancellorship of Professor Hussain, and the Netaji Subhas OU in West Bengal has taken off like a rocket with Professor Surabhi Banerjee at its head.

I realise that institutions cannot always find excellent leaders to order, but what they can do is to give their chief executives a reasonable time in office. Several potentially important distance teaching

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institutions have suffered because governments changed their leadership every two years - or sometimes even more frequently.

An Effective and Balanced Teaching and Learning System

My fifth ingredient of sustainable open and distance learning is an effective and balanced teaching and learning system. I did not list this earlier because even a brilliant teaching system will not carry the institution if its economics are unviable or its institutional structures ineffective. But conversely, long term sustainability, especially at high enrolments, depends on students enjoying their institution so that they come back again and again.

My wife and I have both taken UKOU courses in the last four years and would be students again this year if it accepted students in Canada.

This is not the place to explore the components of an effective study system. Suffice it to say that you need a combination of interesting study materials, effective student support and good logistics. The challenge of sustainability is to ensure that each of these three components changes with the times.

The UKOU, for instance, owes much to David Sewart for the way that he developed its logistics and student support systems to take advantage of new technologies and to respond to student demand for greater flexibility.

It is hardly novel to say that the study system needs to be student friendly, but remember that making it so may take an institution in difficult directions. I consider, for example, that the success of Athabasca University owes much to its continuous enrolment system, something that institutions used to working with paced cohorts may find difficult.

Intellectual Excitement

Finally I suggest that students will enjoy their institution, and help to make it sustainable, if they find their studies intellectually or practically exciting. Education is the key to the enhancing the freedoms that are the measure and means of development. Liberating the human spirit is vital because it generates the confidence necessary to achieve the other freedoms.

During my 11 years as Vice-Chancellor of the UKOU I officiated at some 150 degree ceremonies and spoke individually to 50,000 graduating students. Time and again they told me how study had changed their lives by giving them confidence. Time and again they looked back with affection on a particular course that had changed their thinking. Indeed over the 11 years almost all courses that the University offered were mentioned with nostalgia by someone - including some courses considered to be dogs by the academics who had developed them.

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Conclusion

So, there are some simple thoughts on the vital topic of sustainability that you have been exploring with greater sophistication today.

Sophistication is good, but I suggest to you that simplicity is an important element of sustainability, which depends on people understanding the context in which they are working. Exploring lots of options is fine, but you need to retain clarity of ends and means.

As Winston Churchill said about the United States' involvement in the Second World War, 'America will always do the right thing, after having exhausted all other possibilities'.

Thank you for putting up with me a second time.