

The Sustainable Development of Open and Distance Learning for Sustainable Development



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*After-dinner remarks by
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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be with you and to see so many good friends and former colleagues at this Institute. I offer special greetings to Dr Hilary Perraton, whose involvement with COL predates even mine, and who is the series editor for the book on which you are labouring. In the last forty years Hilary has produced a huge corpus of some of the most useful writing on distance education and we are privileged to have him with us.

I have given my remarks the title *The Sustainable Development of Open and Distance Learning for Sustainable Development*. It sounds like a misprint, the product of a mistake with the copy and paste facility on my word-processor. But I mean it. The first use of the term 'sustainable development' will not surprise you because the focus of this Institute is strategies for sustainable open and distance learning.

But I have added 'sustainable development' again at the end because the purpose of open and distance learning, at least for COL, is to facilitate 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 begins next year in 2005. I understand the concept of education for sustainable development as 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.

Development, according to Amartya Sen, is the enhancement of freedom. The measure of development is the extent to which people enjoy greater freedom on more dimensions. Moreover, freedom is also 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. I do not need to argue to this audience that education is central to development, but identifying freedom as both the measure and the means of development makes the point even clearer.

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 made up of the vectors of access, quality and cost. My point is that education has been assumed, explicitly by most educators, and implicitly by the general public, to be a zero-sum game between 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 Revolution 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, distance education is not just any innovation that can be pursued in a haphazard manner and abandoned when the going gets tough. Because open and distance learning 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 this approach. 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 remainder of this talk 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 the themes that you have identified and clothing them with the flesh of experience. I shall do a bit of both. Since most of my direct experience of open and distance learning has been in higher education I shall focus on that level but I believe that my conclusions extend to other levels of education and training as well.

Note also that I shall inevitably recall more failures and weaknesses than 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.

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 a few months back, took longer to adjust to reality than those launched by institutions or by the private sector, which did 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, IGNOU and the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University operate at scale. Furthermore, 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 already achieved 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 be 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 would 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. In making many decisions the UQ 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.

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.

On the other hand, alliances can be vital. Another interpretation of the failure of the UKOU's USOU 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.

In fact 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 and Ram Reddy at both the Andhra Pradesh OU 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 has 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 Hussein, and the Netaji Subhas OU in West Bengal is finally taking off 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 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.

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.

Conclusion

There are some simple thoughts on the vital topic of sustainability. 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 in the end you must make explicit choices in order to have clarity about ends and means.