

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS AFFECTING DISTANCE LEARNING IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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1. Introduction

The Papua New Guinea University of Technology through its Council and Academic Board approved the development of a distance education programme in 1993. The main aim was to cater for the large population of citizens who were unable to gain access to colleges and other tertiary institutions. Thus, the Department of Open and Distance Learning was established.

The Department of Open and Distance Learning offers matriculation courses in Mathematics, English, Chemistry, Biology and Physics. Over the years the Department has expanded and now it also offers a Diploma in Commerce programme. Plans are under way to offer a Diploma in Mathematics for Teachers commencing at the beginning of the second semester of the 1999 academic year.

Our students come from various backgrounds. The main factors affecting the provision of distance education to the majority of the student population that drops out of the formal system are students' ability to afford our fees, home environment, community attitude to education and other social factors.

Koigiri (1998) reports that only five percent of the students leaving Provincial High Schools, in Papua New Guinea, gain places in National High Schools and tertiary institutions. The rest drop out of the formal system. If appropriate courses to be done at a distance were developed and delivered through appropriate media, there would be no shortage of customers as the potential pool of intake is very large. The student numbers at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology have gone from a mere 49 in 1993 to approximately 2000 at the time of writing.

At the matriculation level we have two categories of students. Those who come to matriculate for the first time and those who have already gone through the process but come to us so that they can upgrade their grades. Most of these have ambitions of advancing to the diploma and degree levels. Whereas the majority of our Matriculation students are unemployed the majority of our Diploma in Commerce students are in employment. One of the prerequisites for enrolment is having at least two years experience in a commerce related profession.

In a country like Papua New Guinea where the education system can not cater for every student as the student numbers that can be absorbed are limited we are left with distance education as the next best alternative. Although, it has its own characteristic problems associated with it, at the moment, distance education can contribute immensely to the development of an educated labour force. It was encouraging to note the following remarks from the country's Vice Minister for Higher Education, Dr John Waiko (1998).

The Higher Education sector needs to shift its focus from the traditional site-based learning to take distance education to the people. This means that instead of students coming to centralised learning institutions, educational services will be taken to them.

Whilst distance education is just one of the alternatives in most developing countries, sometimes it is the only choice in Papua New Guinea. The Government's ability to provide formal education for every eligible citizen is limited by financial constraints.

2. Background

Papua New Guinea gained its independence from Australia in September 1975. Reading further in People Count (1995) one notes that geographically the country consists of the eastern part of the New Guinea island (with Indonesia to the west) and numerous smaller islands, the largest of which are New Britain, New Ireland, North Solomons and Manus. The report further notes that “much of the terrain is extremely rugged with high mountain ranges and steep valleys with fast flowing rivers. In contrast, along the coast there is an extensive system of marshes. The country has only a few major roads, many areas being accessible only by air, foot or boat.”

In developing our distance programmes we are always mindful of the geographical set up of Papua New Guinea. Blainey (1996) in writing about distance education and its provision coined the much cited phrase “The Tyranny of Distance”. In our case, with Blainey’s permission, we would like to rephrase it to “The Tyranny of Terrain”. As reported earlier most of the country is not easily accessible. This has great impact on the choice of the media for the delivery of distance education to the majority of population that need it. At the moment, distance education in Papua New Guinea is mainly print-based. AS we can not rely entirely on the postal service which is extremely slow, most of the students travel to the university to come and enrol personally. This is the time when they are also issued the learning materials.

The latest figures that we have are from The People Count which gave the total population of Papua New Guinea as being approximately 3,761,954. This was further broken down into 1,980,583 Males and 1,781,371 Females. The population distribution is given as 15.4 % living in urban areas and the majority 84.6 % as living in rural areas. This indicates that the population of the country is predominantly rural based.

3. Factors affecting distance students’ learning

There are various factors affecting our students’ learning at the Department of Open and Distance Learning here at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology. Some of the factors are beyond our control. Although, it is always advantageous to understand the reasons attributed to attrition, withdrawals and failure as an understanding of how these reasons affect the students’ learning and progress will enable our staff to be able to give better support. The knowledge gained will also be used in the design and development of high quality distance courses.

We look at some of the socio-economic factors in more detail. Some of the details reported in the next subsection were obtained from the results of a questionnaire carried out by Nyondo and Koigiri (1998). The questionnaire included items which assessed the quality and effectiveness of student support services. We were delighted to receive positive responses from the majority of the respondents.

3.1 Home and study environment

In looking at the background of our students the questionnaire had some items on facilities that were available at home and surroundings. The majority of our students live in rural communities where the best method of contact is the postal system. The questionnaire also tried to obtain information on how many of our students had access to electricity, television, radio, personal computer and a room for study. The results are given in the table below.

Table 1: Percentage of students with access to the listed facility

Electricity	Television	Radio	Personal Computer	A room for study
62%	44%	60%	6%	48%

Even for the student population living in urban communities, one notes from the questionnaire that only forty four percent have access to television and only six percent have access to a personal

computer. Only forty eight percent had a room for private study. How do students cope with their studies in cases where there are no study facilities?

From interviews, we have established a number of solutions that our students have come up with. Those who live in cities and have access to libraries have used them for their study. Some have managed to make arrangements for use of their relatives premises when this has been possible. For the rest who are unable to do any of the above studying on their own has been a very difficult task. Such students require some sort of community assistance. We have not yet worked out how. The establishment of university centres would assist greatly.

For students living in rural areas the situation is even worse. Students who live in rural areas, apart from a lack of electrification, will also lack basic learning support facilities such as libraries and peers with whom they can discuss their learning experiences. Apart from their own study difficulties, most of them will also be expected to contribute to the economic welfare of the family. Finding time for private study in such cases is an enormous task for anybody.

Other implications arise from the results on the other items of the questionnaire. For example, a student who has no telephone in the house will need to walk some distance to a telephone to get assistance from a tutor. This in itself is discouraging. What sort of support can be given in a situation like this? Feedback which is paramount in any teaching-learning process is very slow in coming for our rural student population.

3.2 Attrition and failure rates

There are various reasons why students drop out of their courses. Some reasons involve socio-economic factors which are beyond the control of the university. Although Price et.al. (1992) states "The attrition rate is an indication of the quality of education that the institution offers". This is only so if the reasons are due to factors that can be influenced by the teaching institution.

Meek and Jones (1995) carried out an earlier survey on attrition and failure rates at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology. In their report they made the following comments.

Attrition and failure rates are always of concern in any responsible learning programme. Within Papua New Guinea the reasons given for failure and attrition are unique i.e. tribal fights, dismemberment of a family member (or extended family member) e.t.c. Consequently, considerable awareness must be practiced when dealing with students and their excuses.

At the University of Technology, DODL has laid down clear guidelines for study, student support services, student and departmental performance indicators and quality standards in material development.

Reasons given nowadays by our students for failure and attrition include lack of place for study in the house or neighbourhood, homes usually busy with relatives through out the day, and sometimes a drop in motivation due to lack of support from immediate family members. It is reported in People Count (1995) that Papua New Guinea is essentially an agrarian country. People of all ages work in various degrees in producing food for their family or for sale. Sometimes education is the last thing on their minds. Community attitude to education was found to be one of the social factors that can encourage or discourage the learning efforts of our students studying at a distance and on their own. Full time students have the advantage of peer and other support services.

3.3 Tuition fees and learner characteristics

Our students come from various backgrounds. We have already mentioned that the main factors affecting the provision of distance education to the majority of the student population that drops out of the formal system are students' ability to afford our fees, home environment, community attitude to

education and other social factors. In a country of high unemployment some communities do not regard education as a priority. They look at their children who never made it to National High School or tertiary institution levels as failures who floundered their chances.

The financial burden of coping with the tuition fees may be too much for most families. And unfortunately, there are no Government funded scholarships for distance education at the moment. There is a National Scholarship scheme established only for full time students in the universities. Government funding for education has not improved. The annual budget allocation to the universities and other tertiary institutions has remained relatively the same for a number of years.

We can not just look at the socio-economic factors affecting our students' learning in isolation. Individual learner characteristics also impinge on their learning capabilities. Campbel (1992) points out that elements such as age, maturity, and learning styles have been identified as characteristics which can impact the learning process of the distant student.

Mature aged students may have family responsibilities which will limit the time available for study. If they are working the only time available for study is after work. But, this is also the time they may have to share with family responsibilities. Individual motivation for study and reasons why students enrolled in the first place will determine how far a student will go even when support is not available.

4. Concluding remarks

It is generally agreed by most academics in Papua New Guinea that distance education should be promoted and supported as the institutions in the country can not cope with the demand. More schools, which hitherto did not offer Grades 11 and 12, have been expanded to include these two higher grades. But there has been no corresponding expansion at the tertiary level. This means that we are going to be getting a larger proportion than before dropping out of the formal system. A cheaper way of alleviating this problem would be an investment in distance education. Koigiri (1998) supports this view. In one of his proposals for the expansion of the Department of Open and Distance Learning at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology, he had this to say.

Establishment of more universities by the National Government is impossible, given the current economic climate, which is likely to continue for a long period of time. In any case, establishing and maintaining any institution of higher learning is an expensive exercise and even now, the existing institutions are under funded, resulting in them being unable to expand their normal academic activities. This has been the trend for the last five or six years and there are no indications that the situation will be any better in the future. Only option left for the Papua New Guinea University of Technology is to develop and offer tertiary education at the distance to those who require it.

The country has a number of institutions providing distance education at various levels. They include the College of Distance Education, an autonomous institution which was established in 1952, Adventist college, Institute of Distance and Continuing Education at the University of Papua New Guinea and the Department of Open and Distant Education here at the Papua New Guinea university of Technology.

The socio-economic factors discussed as facing distant students' learning at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology are equally applicable to the other institutions offering distance education programmes in the country.

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