

# **From Colonies of Learning to Commonwealth of Learning: Some Thoughts on the Significance of Distance Education from the Preindependence Era.**

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## **Abstract**

There is often the perception that distance education is a recent phenomenon. The Education Reports of Barbados during the 1940s and 1950s reveal that there was a segment of the adult community pursuing degrees and other qualifications with British universities and educational bodies. There was quite clearly a vibrant system for studying by correspondence course from the UK at a time when there were limited educational opportunities within many British territories.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what lessons might be learnt from looking at distance education from this earlier period, and what research is needed to better understand the evolution of distance education and the role that it played, and continues to play, in the Commonwealth grouping.

The pursuit of educational qualifications by distance learning was undoubtedly beneficial to students; how it might have assisted in personal and national advancement will also be discussed. The paper will also examine how much the nature of distance education has changed over the decades, and what legacies of the past are still to be surmounted.

Distance Education(DE) has a long history. Demiray and Ismay have presented a history of distance learning which can be divided into five periods:

1. A period before correspondence education, where attempts were made to provide education to persons separated by distance;
2. The emergence of fully developed correspondence systems, where the postal system was used to distribute the educational material;
3. The incorporation of broadcasting through radio and television to transmit course materials;
4. Improved communications through audio and video, allowing more interaction between teachers and students;
5. The latest period, using the most advanced telecommunications technology to facilitate teleconferencing, web casting, which facilitate immediate contact between teacher and student.

The early correspondence schools began to take shape in the 1870s and 1880s. Many of these, were private commercial ventures which suggests that there was a recognisable demand for courses. By the turn of the century the provision of correspondence courses had also become a part of the operations of universities with the establishment of University Correspondence College, Cambridge in 1887, Wolsey Hall College, Oxford in 1894 and Metropolitan College, London in 1910. Some time in the early twentieth century the correspondence system must have been extended to Britain's colonies. Being private commercial initiatives, they might have viewed the colonies as a potential market. Within the colonies demand for British correspondence courses was probably influenced by an imported values system, which emphasised the benefits of British education. Canada and Australia began to develop their own internal correspondence systems due to what has been called the 'tyranny of distance'.

Australia began its first correspondence system from the University of Queensland in 1911.

In the pre-independence era, studying by correspondence from the UK would also have been driven by socio-economic conditions since, in many places, only colonial elites had access to education beyond secondary, or even primary level. Also vast distances within some colonies meant that attendance at the available institutions was difficult. The economics of educational access for colonial governments also determined that the educational aspirations of the population could not be financed by government. Studying by distance opened a whole range of opportunities for literate persons across the empire. The records of Barbados' Department of Education in 1953 reveal that the department was proctoring examinations for:

The University of London

The Oxford and Cambridge Examination Board

London Chamber of Commerce

The Royal Society of Arts

The College of Preceptors

City and Guilds of London Institute

The Council of Legal Education

The Chartered Institute of Secretaries

The Association of Intermediate Accountants

The Corporation of Certified Secretaries

The Association of Certified and Corporate Accountants

The Society of Commercial Accountants

The Library Association

This list indicates the diversity of qualifications being sought by students, the programmes being academic, technical and professional in nature.

In the decade after World War II, the British Government focused on addressing the social and economic problems of the colonies. Demands for self rule, political and economic reform, and a new philosophy on social development led to strategies which would demonstrate better colonial stewardship in the interest of colonial peoples. Commitment to expansion in education was a part of this strategy and particular attention was given to training and higher education. In 1947 the Inter-University Council for Higher Education in the Colonies stated that the main objective for further education in the colonies is "to create within the colonies residential universities of high standards and adapted to local needs, to supplement the insufficient facilities for research and post-secondary education which are now available for colonial peoples in their own territories overseas." What the Council was hoping to achieve was the development of local universities.

In this report the only reference to DE and the role it was fulfilling in the colonies was the statement that the scheme for colonial education was to "minimize the disadvantages of the external system to introduce the characteristic features of the internal college." However, the Council was eager to capitalize on the relationship that London University had developed for external students. It was stated that "the external degree of London University has for many years been the traditional goal of those West Indian students who were unable to enter a university." The relationship with London University was critical in establishing institutions of higher learning in the colonies. University Colleges would be established in the West Indies in 1947; Gordon

Memorial College in Khartoum in 1946 ; University College of the Gold Coast in 1948 and Makerere College, Uganda in 1948. London University would provide supervision and guidance with the curriculum, teaching, resources and would confer the degrees of the university colleges. Along with a preparatory role, London would be providing University College graduates in the colonies with degrees which "would be recognised throughout the University world for such purposes as admission to postgraduate courses." What was the underlying goal behind this provision of university education where it was still needed? In the actual words of the Council the "Africanization of the public services and the vast commitment made on development which require large numbers of technically trained men and women."

There are few figures to provide an assessment of how many people in Barbados and the West Indies furthered their education through DE. Records for Barbados suggest that as many Barbadians were graduating from the University College of the West Indies as were obtaining external degrees from London almost every year. This writer suggests that the postal networks that had grown up between the colonies and the mother country, and the prevalence of English facilitated the easy transfer of correspondence materials. The money orders available through the postal services also facilitated the payment of fees. Populations which already had well established systems for primary education in English were probably better markets for correspondence courses from Britain.

How well regarded were the qualifications gained by UK correspondence schools? One can only imagine that they were deemed satisfactory, but not as highly esteemed as qualifications gained from resident study. An indication of this comes from a meeting of the Education Board in Barbados in 1945 where it was agreed that there would be two scales: "Scale A for graduates of universities from the British Isles acquired by residence in the university and that all other graduates including graduates of Canadian universities should be paid on Scale B."

Research is needed to assess the impact that correspondence education was making to human resource development in the Empire. Even without data one cannot ignore that a contribution was being made. Yet, the phenomenon was largely ignored by educational planners. Large territories like Canada and Australia established their own correspondence systems and departments were being created within some of the emerging local universities. This internal distance education was better facilitated by the use of radio to broadcast education material to non-resident students.

Individual efforts to pursue an education through correspondence, plus university enterprise and entrepreneurship contributed to the development of human capital within the Commonwealth and undoubtedly made a difference in the lives of those who participated. Fagerlind and Saha(1989) have highlighted the ways in which education contributes to individual development:

Education broadens perspectives and mental horizons; it instils new values and beliefs supportive of modernization programs and goals and promotes national unity and identity. Furthermore it provides individual opportunities for upward mobility, develops skills and knowledge important for technological and industrial change, and in general helps overcome immobile ways of thinking and immobile systems of social stratification and differentiation.

Participation in distance education programmes undoubtedly supported modernization. Along with suggesting that early DE assisted in human capital creation, it would be useful to see it as part of a modernization process. Despite the fact that opportunities for residential education have increased over the last half century, the demand for DE has not decreased. Distance Education has adjusted to the demands of the age and catered to those who need that mode of education. But the growth of distance education itself has been a part of the modernization phenomenon of the western world. It has helped to liberate those disadvantaged by distance and domestic circumstances to triumph over these constraints and gain an education. The quest for education itself is seen as part of the manifestation of modernization. We can utilize

the definition that "modernization is essentially a social-psychological process through which a country becomes modern only after its population has adopted modern attitudes, values and beliefs". One could contend, that early DE was propelled by individuals who had adopted a value system which accepted Western education and qualifications.

The argument has been made that it is the curriculum of Western type schools that contributes most to education's role in modernization. The curricula disseminated from London and Oxford reflected Western educational values, packed and posted to colonial students, and directly or indirectly instilling the Western value system. The expansion of DE therefore can be "explained historically as the incorporation of the individual into expanding rational societies and states, which both legitimate the individual and contribute to the strengthening of the nation state and its institutions." Distance education would also have contributed to cultural convergence across the commonwealth since it contributed to the creation of a homogeneous educational system emanating from the UK.

Distance education research would benefit from a long range perspective on how DE influenced personal and career development. The experiences of persons who were students forty years ago could be utilized; comparisons with peers who had no opportunity for further education and those with residential attendance could be made. There is insufficient data on numbers engaged in distance education, both in the past and the present. Distance education is often outside the mainstream of educational data collection. This needs to change. Current participants in DE could be utilised in life course research to follow their DE experience and its benefits to them over time. Life course research anticipates and follows "status passages, transitions and critical life events during the occupational career." Life course and biographical research utilizes the element of time and effect in the research. The passage of time also allows for research into the evolution of course delivery itself.

Modern DE utilizes technology, but has the nature of the content changed over time. Borje Holmberg(1995) supports the view that the use of technology in distance education has been of:

Evolutionary rather than revolutionary character. There is no change in conditions: students still mainly study individually at a distance from, i.e. not on the same premises as their tutors, the communication is still brought about non-contiguously by media, now, however, at least in part of new kinds. Distance education has simply availed itself of the technical developments of modern society."

This implies that much of modern day distance education is correspondence material by high-tech delivery systems. Characteristic of this would be courses mass produced for transmission to thousands of students, with assistance provided by tutors who have not prepared the course material or participated in its development. The material is not varied or adapted to suit the needs of specific target groups. Despite the emphasis on openness and open learning, much of distance education still carries the dissemination orientation that was so much a part of study by correspondence. The characteristics of the dissemination approach are the emphasis "on the preparation and packaging of materials in a form that will enable widespread availability for individualized study . . . with its emphasis on the acquisition of pre-constructed knowledge and movement toward predetermined ends." This methodology is often accused of inflexibility but it has the advantage of being easier to administer and for student assessment. One must also acknowledge that some students may prefer the structure and prescribed programming of the dissemination approach. It would help mitigate the need for self discipline which is already a large requirement for study by distance.

Boot and Hodgson(1987) set the dissemination orientation against the development orientation. The latter they view as truly open learning, with an open curriculum centring on "the provision of structures and processes to enable individuals to control the direction and content of their own learning." This debate on control and independence is relevant when looking at the development of distance education.

Distance learning methodology is still built on the correspondence methodology, i.e. the dissemination of mass produced educational material, studied by individuals who are geographically distant from their tutors. Technology now facilitates faster and better communication, but has this really contributed to more student autonomy or greater institutional control? In terms of content how much have learner needs been catered for? There is much scope for the individualization of content, where students with their tutors can help design learning experiences that are suited to their own needs.

The main trans-national provider of distance education within the commonwealth is probably still the UK. It would make interesting research to find out how much of the distance education courses and materials are adopted to cater to the realities of non-UK students. Having had decades of DE practice within the commonwealth we must ask ourselves how much of what happens still has a North/South orientation. Developments for interregional distance education, where universities have developed distance education programmes for their country and region are commendable. But despite the decade's one could, without the research, assume that the developed countries within the Commonwealth are still the most desired providers of distance education programmes, for those who can afford them. Kirkwood asks "What will be the impact on the receiving nations? Overseas institutions may offer students the opportunity to gain higher status qualifications, but will their courses be sufficiently grounded in the local laws, culture, customs and practices to prepare graduates for work with their own country? Will the qualifications offered by home institutions become devalued?" How much inter-country exchange of knowledge and granting of qualifications is taking place between the former colonies themselves? Are students from the Caribbean pursuing programmes from African or Pacific universities or vice versa?. There needs to be more cross border exchange between Commonwealth nations which trickles down to the level of the individual student.

The influence of the developed world on distance education can be seen in the agenda for more sophisticated technology in distance education, when there are many countries within the Commonwealth that still grapple with achieving basic communications infrastructure. There must be efforts therefore to utilize methods of DE that can be effected in locations with very basic infrastructure. In the heyday of correspondence schools many students operated under the same conditions that prevailed in underdeveloped countries today: with no telephone or television, linked to the outside world through radio, post and printed material. Philip Townsend quoted the statement that "print will continue to dominate for a long time as the main medium for distance education in Papua New Guinea . . . the use of videos, television, computers and other technology is not possible in the rural areas at the moment, Radio based programmes if they were developed would be very popular and more accessible to the majority of the population." Distance Education must not forget its history, the methodologies previously used should remain within the arsenal for delivering education by distance. Employing the most modern technology is good, but it may not always be relevant for the needs of students within some parts of the Commonwealth. Planners should not be daunted by the lack of internet access in the hinterland. There is still the post and the radio broadcast.

At a Commonwealth workshop on "Using open and distance learning to overcome barriers," it was opined that the use of technology in education must be demand rather than supply led. At the conference, ministers also recommended that because, many Commonwealth citizens live in areas with electricity, "there is a need to investigate ways of getting education products to people in these isolated areas without the use of costly technology."

## Conclusion

The fact that DE has existed in the countries which make up the Commonwealth for almost a century causes one to draw certain conclusions. Despite its long existence, there is still the need for data on the numbers who study by DE across the Commonwealth, the types of qualifications sought, the disciplines studied and the cost of programmes. Biographic and life course research will also give a better understanding of the impact of DE on individual lives. Only with this type of research can we fully ascertain the impact which DE is making to national development.

History shows that technology is not a prerequisite for DE which existed before telecommunications. Therefore older methods of delivery have their usefulness, especially in underdeveloped countries, and should be maintained alongside the deployment of high tech methodologies where they are best suited.

The Commonwealth is said to rest on the three pillars of language, law and learning. DE by correspondence was a part of the pillar of learning and was facilitated by the pillar of a common language. These pillars are indeed "sound bases for education interchange." But has there been enough educational interchange? In the old correspondence schemes communication was essentially one way. When looking at DE we find that the pattern of the colonial era still remains. Most of the trans-national provision probably emanates from the UK. More could be done to truly create a community for learning where there is access to DE between member states many of whom have mature and highly respected institutions for further education. There has already been a call for more scholarships and South /South interaction.

Since the Commonwealth is a multinational organization its activities tend to centre on participation at the level of national governments. It must be ensured that most of this dialogue impacts on the learning and the DE practices to make them more relevant, developmental and innovative. DE Students need not exist in a colonial relationship with their providers, but should be given the opportunity to be participants in creating better opportunities for learning and the interchange of knowledge. This certainly would be an improvement on the correspondence methodology of the past.

#### **ENDNOTES**

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