

Creating awareness about Urban Planning to the community

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INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development and sustainable planning is broad public and specially community participation in decision-making and involvement of all stakeholders specially the social groups and NGO's. Furthermore, according to Agenda 21, new forms of participation have emerged and these include the need of individuals, groups and organisations to participate in decisions particularly those which potentially affect the communities in which they live and work. Individuals, groups and organisations should have access to information relevant to urban planning and development held by national authorities, including information on products and activities that have or are likely to have a significant impact on planning, and information on sustainable development. The government of Mauritius has embarked on a project called the 'Maurice Ile Durable' (MID) project which is a long term vision aimed at promoting sustainable development. The main aim of this project is to make Mauritius a role model of sustainable development. One of the key partners of the government in this endeavour is the University of Mauritius as one of the roles of the University is to educate the people about important issues and to encourage community development. As such, the university has to go forward and be a tool in creating awareness among the Mauritian people and to encourage community participation towards achieving sustainable development.

THE MAURITIAN CONTEXT

'The core mission of the University of Mauritius is the creation and dissemination of knowledge and understanding for the citizens of Mauritius and the international community' (source: University of Mauritius Website). As such, the University of Mauritius is encouraging the enrolment of mature students and it is therefore encouraging the concept of lifelong learning. The Centre for Professional Development and Lifelong Learning (CPDL) and the Virtual Centre for Innovating Learning Technologies (VCILT) were set up in order to ensure a better dissemination of learning and education.

The Centre for professional development and lifelong learning set up in 2005 has the following aims:

- Design and deliver Programmes of a non-conventional nature targeted towards the whole community, to face the emerging needs created by the re-engineering of the Mauritian society.
- Encourage the continuing personal growth and intellectual development of adults, empowering them to reflect and generate change for themselves.

In fact, the CPDL's mandate is to offer training programmes that are designed in consultation with stakeholders, using flexible modes of delivery that range from face to face lectures and seminars, print-based package to online/blended learning.

Since its setting up, this centre has promoted the development of short courses which are more accessible to students who need flexibility and who seek immediate pertinence and relevance in the programme in which they are involved. As such, it is offering second chance opportunities to mature learners and meeting the needs for retraining and upgrading skills of professionals.

The centre is also encouraging the delivery of short programmes during the vacation periods. Up to now, the centre has run more than 25 short courses known as Summer/Winter courses, covering different fields. Based on the feedback questionnaires, it was found that, overall, students were very satisfied with the courses and were interested in joining other such courses. There was a request to

offer courses that will complement and complete what was started through these short courses. Working students welcomed such initiatives from the University of Mauritius, considering that these courses are of high standard and meet their immediate needs. It was very encouraging to see that the public at large showed such interest in this initiative of the University. The 'Planning Tool' and the 'Environmental Management' short courses were run several times and there was a good response from the learners who came from different backgrounds and who were from different age groups. But there were some problems encountered with these short courses and this concerned mostly the availability of facilities after 'working' hours. Transport facilities and security were the major hurdles to these courses. As such, it would have been very convenient to convert these courses to open-learning modes where these problems would have been overcome and the courses would have been accessible to more people.

The creation of the VCILT formed part of the Strategic Objectives of the UOM Strategic Plan, whose objectives are as follows:

- to increase student intake
- to enhance distance learning, develop flexible learning and experiment with educational delivery systems
- to develop institutional course articulation arrangements
- to provide continuing education and lifelong Learning.

The VCILT has also come up with short courses and General Education Modules (GEMs) which is also encouraging the community at large especially mature students to participate due to the flexibility provided by on-line learning.

These centres have been very helpful in the setting up of the courses in Town and Country Planning as many modules are taught with the help of the different technologies existing in open-learning. As the students are mostly mature students, who are professionals in the planning sector, these new ways of teaching are very helpful. Actually more than 90% of the staff in the planning departments of local authorities has followed the Diploma in Town and Country Planning and about 50% have followed the BSc in Town and Country Planning at the University of Mauritius. But, it is true that Mauritians are not really aware of the basic principles of town and country planning and for them it is a hurdle or a hassle when they want to carry out a development. They have the impression that planners are here to discourage development. They are not really aware of the steps taken by the government to encourage sustainable development.

It is thus very important to come up with different ways in which the University can play a vital role in creating awareness and educating the people about the concepts of urban planning and sustainable development and how the university will help reach out to the population and make people aware of their basic rights and privileges. It is important to sensitise the community in such a manner that they do not forget what they have learnt, as it usually happens when short campaigns are carried out.

The University of Mauritius has taken various initiatives to encourage collaboration with researchers outside the University and the main stakeholders in various fields, one of them being the setting up of an Excellence Park which aims at addressing national priorities and opportunities through a more flexible organisational structure for promoting research and development. Many multidisciplinary centres of excellence (MCE) have been established under this umbrella. One of the main objectives of the MCEs is 'to develop and support courses with the aim of providing expert up-to-date knowledge' to the main stakeholders in each respective field.

One other way that the University can disseminate awareness about the importance of planning and sustainable development is through the concept of Executive Development Programmes (EDPs) which are short, targeted training programs which are tailor-made to the client's needs and which are elaborated with the collaboration and participation of the client. There have been requests from local authorities and other stakeholders to the University concerning some short programs for their staff. There has been lot of changes in the planning and environment framework with new policies which have been adopted to meet the objectives for a wide range of major national and regional issues in Mauritius with the advent with the MID project and the main stakeholders want their staff to be aware of these changes. As such, courses should be tailor-made for this target group and they would benefit from the advantages of open-learning as they are full time professionals who have lots of time constraints.

The University is also integrating more and more modules in its programs, which are non-examinable, and which encourage full time students to participate in community programs of social interest. Some of these programs are concerned with sustainable development in certain communities.

CONCLUSION

Educators in both industrialised and developing countries have used open and distance education to help their problems of resources, access, quality and quantity. (Perraton, 2000). This is also the case in Mauritius and the University of Mauritius has been making use of the facilities available with open learning to create awareness about sustainable development and planning. It is thus the role of the University to make sure that people and communities are genuinely engaged in the decisions made on public services and to make them participate in the decision making process. It is only then that Mauritius can become a model for sustainable development, which is the main aim of the Prime Minister through the 'Maurice Ile Durable' Project.

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