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**Title Of Paper:** Accessing Education In The New  
Millennium: The Road To Success And  
Development Through Open And  
Distance Learning In The  
Commonwealth.

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## **Abstract**

With the ever changing economic situations, technological advancement, political situations and societal expectations of countries, the developing countries of The Commonwealth increasingly find themselves with more and more barriers to overcome in order to make education accessible to more and more people. Innovativeness and dynamism of thought are therefore called for in the provision of education. Open Learning and Distance Education is one way in which some countries have found as a way forward in the provision of reasonably priced mass education.

In order for people in the developing countries of The Commonwealth to successfully access open learning, there are a number of barriers which must be overcome. This paper is going to look at the way forward in the provision of Open Learning in the developing countries of The Commonwealth with particular reference to barriers to access and success vis-à-vis development. Such barriers to access as poverty, lack of infrastructure such as buildings, transmission technology such as internet links, telecommunication links, libraries, road networks, bridges, lack of human and material resources, lack of funds, language, societal barriers; for example customs that affect the education of females, the disabled and the poor among others will be discussed. Holmberg (1989) cited in Ogili (1998) cites the availability of transport services, library services, support staff, warehousing services, finance, study centres, and road networks etcetera as necessary for distance education programmes.

In addition to the above, such barriers to success and development as corruption, lack of professionals, lack of sound management practice, poor reward systems for staff and lack of staff development among others will be discussed by the paper. The paper will also make suggestions as to the way forward in overcoming these barriers to access and success to Open Learning with the view to discussing and sharing ideas with colleagues.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, the writer is going to look at the way forward in the provision of Open Learning Higher Education in the developing countries of the Commonwealth with particular reference to barriers to access and success vis-à-vis development. Barriers to access will be looked at first followed by barriers to success and development.

## **Barriers to Access**

Barriers to access in Open Learning in the developing countries of the Commonwealth include poverty, lack of infrastructure, lack of transmission technology such as internet links, telecommunication links, lack of libraries, lack of road networks and bridges, lack of human and material resources, lack of funds, language and cultural barriers etcetera.

### **Poverty**

In most developing countries of The Commonwealth, poverty is one of the most challenging barriers to accessing education. Open Learning and Distance Education while reasonably cheaper to provide than conventional education, still demands for the availability of basic infrastructure, equipment and resources. These do not come free. Therefore, any aspiring student of Open and Distance Learning, has to pay some basic fee of some sort towards their education, for example the teaching staff, lecture rooms, modules, video cassettes, handouts etcetera have to be paid for. The governments of most developing countries of The Commonwealth are struggling with high inflation, high foreign debt, high budget deficits, natural disasters, mismanagement of resources, company closures; reducing the export base and generally their economies are on the brink of collapse. They can hardly manage to subsidise education for the poor.

Most people of the developing countries of The Commonwealth who might like to benefit from Open Learning and Distance Education are employed in low paying jobs such as in the factories, mines, farms as well as in the commercial sector. They can hardly afford their day to day basic requirements of food, shelter, water, transport, light etcetera. In some countries, the prices of these basics have skyrocketed to unaffordable levels. Such poor majority are therefore unable to access Open Learning even if it is provided. It is in fact consumed by a middle to Upper Class minority who can afford to pay the basic fee.

### **Lack Of Infrastructure**

Another barrier to accessing of Open Learning in the developing countries of The Commonwealth is lack of infrastructure. Buildings such as lecture theatres, examinations halls, libraries, laboratories

etcetera are very expensive to construct. In Zimbabwe for example, prices of building inputs such as cement, timber, bricks etcetera have shot through the ceiling for most developers. The inflation keeps rising. While in Open Learning, one may be able to do with excess capacity or vacant capacity in existing conventional institutions of learning, it is still imperative for institutions of Open Learning to put up some basic infrastructure of their own in order to have a meaningful presence and existence. In most cases institutions of Open Learning in developing countries of The Commonwealth have to rely on sometimes expensive rented accommodation whose availability may be limited. Also the availability of transmission technology such as internet links, telecommunications and equipment such as computers, video cassettes, computer diskettes etcetera, may be difficult to achieve due to lack of funds by the Open Learning institution. According to Kim-Rupnow. et. al. (2001), commonly used instructional materials in the studies they reviewed on trends in distance education delivery, were “print, pre-recorded audio or video cassettes, computer diskettes and CD-ROMs. These instructional materials were delivered via postal services, live or pre-recorded radio or TV broadcasting and conferencing, telephone, facsimile (fax), e-mail, and the World Wide Web”. The budgets to such institutions of Open Learning in developing countries are largely inadequate to provide all these necessary requirements. In some developing countries, lack of road networks, bridges as well as vehicles and railway links are some of the challenges to overcome in the provision of Open Learning. Students are not able to link easily with the institution of Open Learning.

### **Shortage Of Human And Material Resources**

Another barrier to access to Open Learning in the developing countries of The Commonwealth is the unavailability of human resources in the form of subject experts as well as support staff in the form of technicians. There is a general trend by subject specialists to move from developing countries to the developed world where working conditions are perceived to be better. Some experts are succumbing to the dreaded HIV/AIDS and other diseases, hence they become fewer.

Material resources provides another formidable barrier to access in the provision of Open Learning in the developing countries of The Commonwealth. Production costs of materials such as modules, handouts etcetera are forever rising. These resources therefore are often not enough for all the students, hence they are not adequately provided for. Often Open Learning institutions do not have enough funds for their day to day operations, hence they are forced to limit their enrolments as well as the number and variety of programmes

they can offer to students. According to Medina (1999), “In ODL, there is comparatively higher investment for course development. (Before students are even registered), and more has to be spent on permanent course teams”.

### **Cultural And Language Barriers**

One other barrier is that of culture and language. Most institutions of Open Learning in The Commonwealth use English Language as a medium of instruction. This impinges progress upon most students who do not have this language at a proficiency level. Most are not able to follow programmes being offered by institutions of Open Learning. Sometimes it is a requirement for an aspiring student to have passed English at for example, ‘O’ level before they can enrol on a course. If a student is not literate enough in the language of instruction, they have a problem accessing the instruction programme from the medium or source of instruction such as the internet, the lecturer, module etcetera.

Manning (2001) commenting on such student barriers in the United Kingdom says, “Imagine the position of the student with no direct experience of U.K culture and education studying in Italy, whose level of English is of uncertain standard, and for whom putting forward an argument may mean something either completely different from or unknown in their experience”. She later goes on to say, “It is not just a matter of the student being able to understand the course materials, but being able to answer assignment and examination questions on an equal footing with other students.....”

Cultural barriers emanate from customs and beliefs of certain groups in society. In some cultures, females are not held on an equal basis with males, hence the education of females is not taken seriously. The tendency is to invest in the education of males. There is therefore need to educate and persuade certain communities of people within The Commonwealth to invest in female education as well as that for males without discrimination. Sometimes, facilities for the disabled student of Open Learning are difficult to provide, for example, learning materials in Braille for the blind, reading glasses, chairs, lifts as well as other facilities for the disabled are very expensive to provide and most institutions of Open Learning do not have adequate funds to provide for these. Some of the equipment is also mostly imported from the developed world, hence scarce foreign currency is required for such purchases. Some societies also tend to discriminate against the disabled in the provision of education. The communities tend to provide for or spend their money on able bodied children than the disabled. The way forward according to Rees (2001) on the position of women in Science in Academe in the European Union drawing upon some of the data collected for the “ETAN” (European Technology Assessment Network Report) shows how the position of women in

science might be improved by the application of equal treatment, positive action and gender mainstreaming. Kim-Rupnow et.al. (ibid) referring to the British Open University policy to help students with severe disabilities and low incomes points out that such students are assisted through financial support, equipment loans, maintenance services etcetera. This is however more difficult with the institutions in developing countries as they have poor financial bases.

## **Barriers To Success And Development**

Among the barriers to success and development, in Open Learning in developing countries of The Commonwealth are; corruption, lack of professionals, lack of sound management practice, poor reward systems for staff and lack of staff development.

### **Corruption**

One of the barriers to success and development is corruption. Some institutions of Open Learning in the developing countries of The Commonwealth are affected by corruption in the hiring and firing of staff. Relatives and friends of high officials sometimes get jobs in the institutions of Open Learning at the expense of better qualified and experienced personnel. Sometimes tenders for supply of materials and services are awarded to friends, relatives bribe givers or through dubious deals. Such practices impinge upon success and development in Open Learning.

### **Shortage Of Professionals**

Another of the barriers to success and development is the shortage of manpower in the form of subject experts and technocrats in certain fields of study or maintenance of equipment. For an Open Learning programme to be successful, there is need to have professional staff in the various courses on offer. However, such staff are not adequate and have a high turnover rate. For example, staff to teach in the Mathematics, Scientific and sometimes Commercial fields are in short supply and have a high mobility. Also technicians for the repair and maintenance of Open Learning transmission equipment such as VCR's, internet links, televisions, telephones etcetera are in short supply. The Education sector does not pay enough for such skills, hence such people tend to be lured more by the Commercial sector where they get better packages.

The success of Open Learning programmes hinges more on the stability and availability of such professional staff. Therefore, the success of certain Open Learning programmes is adversely affected by

such facts as above. There is therefore need to train more of these professionals as well as source funds for the creation of better packages for professional staff with a view to retaining them for the success of the programmes offered by Open Learning. This will then aid development in The Commonwealth.

In the United Kingdom, Shattock (2001) quoting the Dearing Report 1997 says "Dearing accepted that most evidence pointed to a relative decline in academic salaries". He goes further to say, "The Bett Committee found that the salaries of Academic staff in pre-1992 universities had fallen by 18 percent compared with other staff in the public sector and 30 percent with staff in the economy as a whole since 1981 (Bett Report 1999)." The situation is worse in the developing countries of The Commonwealth.

### **Lack Of Sound Management Practice**

One other barrier to success and development in Open Learning in The Commonwealth developing countries is lack of sound management practice. Sometimes the people who are appointed to high office in Open and Distance Learning do not have proper management skills. As a result their management practice is poor. They often lack professionalism, proper management ethics etcetera. They lack strategic management skills, they cannot build conducive working environments for staff nor can they build team spirit required in a learning institution.

Their management practice is raw and leaves a lot to be desired. Some tend to work like bureaucrats or more like civil servants who apply the rule book in its raw form. Garrison (1989) quoted in Ogili (1998) pointed out that a distance education programme can only succeed if sound management practices are effectively applied to its operation. According to him, essential management practices for Distance Education programmes are:

- Provision of two-way communication,
- Library facilities,
- Involving Consultative Services,
- Linking Support Services,
- Open Admission Policy,
- Recruitment of Professionals and their regular payment of salaries and allowances,
- Awarding grants to researchers,
- Training of Staff,
- Involving multi-media approach,
- Division of Labour,
- Identifying target groups,
- Marketing the programmes,
- Record Keeping,
- Distribution and delivery of services,
- Monitoring, etcetera.

### **Poor Rewards For Staff**

Financial resources of some Open Learning institutions in the developing countries of The Commonwealth are limited. There is a general shortage of funds, hence institutions are not able to reward their staff adequately. Remuneration is poor, hence institutions of Open Learning are not able to attract and retain the best of staff.

Such benefits as housing and transport allowances as well as bonuses may be pegged at very low levels or are non-existent. Such factors as above impinge on the success of the programmes offered by institutions of Open Learning in the developing countries of The Commonwealth. It would also appear that the situation is similar for academics in the developed world as cited elsewhere in this paper (Shattock 2001).

### **Staff Development**

Success in Open Learning in some institutions of The Commonwealth is affected by lack of staff development programmes. Sometimes institutions do not have tangible staff development programmes. These programmes are for the acquisition of new skills by staff members such as new technological skills due to innovations in technology, acquisition of new knowledge due to new research findings, learning of new approaches to learning and teaching as well as for personal advancement of staff members. Sometimes change of role played such as due to promotion or change of department or change in job nature require staff development. It is necessary for staff to have the requisite skills in order for Open Learning programmes to be successful. Kelly and Watts (2001) referring to academics and the ever changing delivery technology in Distance and Open Learning have this to say, "We are expected, as educationalists to be instant experts on using the new, and ever developing, media for teaching and learner support purposes, but our pupils and students probably have a better intuitive sense of the potential of the various technologies than we do". This thus emphasises the need for staff development in Open and Distance Learning.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to say that access, success and development in Open and Distance Learning in The Commonwealth is faced by a variety of barriers. Such challenges as changes in technology compounded by lack of staff development programmes, unavailability of resources and infrastructure, corruption, inflation, cultural diversity, political changes, challenges due to geographical location and globalisation, the type of service demanded by society



etcetera impinge on access, success and development in mostly the developing countries of The Commonwealth. Some barriers affect the developing countries of The Commonwealth more than the developed countries, while others are a problem throughout The Commonwealth.

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