

An alternative pathway for open learning and skills training through distance education in Papua New Guinea

John Paul, Department of Education

Abstract

National Education Department recognizes that there is a natural consensus to make education a life long need for all citizens, distance education has both opportunities and challenges to cater for traditional learners for education qualifications, professionals to upgrade knowledge and skills to the communities to acquire skills and knowledge and information.

This paper provides a unique platform for sharing and exchanging ideas in perspective of Open and Distance Learning in relation to national development needs, institutional capacities, collaboration and sharing resources, globalization and ICT enabled education and more profoundly to quality of program delivery.

THE UNIQUE REALITIES OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Papua New Guinea comprises the eastern half of the world's second largest island, together with 1 400 neighboring islands. Physically, Papua New Guinea varies enormously – from sweeping densely, inhabited highland and valleys, to sluggish meandering coastal rivers, huge flood plains and mangroves, and the myriad islands surrounded by coral reefs and cays. The great beauty belies the logistical difficulties of the geography. Transport is best by air and sea, not land.

The population is in excess of 5.2 million (53 percent male and 47 percent female) with a growth rate of some 2.3 percent per annum. There are more than 800 languages. Approximately 52 percent of the population is literate. Women are most disadvantaged group in the society and achievements in gender equity have been poor.

There are marked differences in the living standards between the rural and urban areas and among 20 provinces (including the National Capital district).

Approximately 91 percent of Papua New Guineans live under rural conditions and meet most of their needs through subsistence agriculture. This way of life is undergoing change as the population becomes involved in cash cropping and there is rapid migration to urban centre.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Education is fundamental to Life and National Development. Learning has no boundaries and no end. Whether we live in Tribal or modern communities, the need for learning are there. We need to survive in the middle of the challenges we face each day. Therefore we must learn all we can to make informed choices about how we live in our communities.

The last fifty years have witness significant progress in the expansion and standards of education in the country. However, the rate of growth of population continues to be one of the key factors that will determine both the direction and speed of education development in the country. This poses triple challenge of;

- making up for existing witness shortcomings in education services (particularly access for neglected groups)
- Expanding services to keep pace with population growth; and
- Staying abreast of latest development skills and teacher training are likely tools for the future.

A well educated community in the modern context is essential not only to prepare individuals for intellectual excellence but also to develop the correct mindset on issues within and outside the community, including respect for each other's rights and properties. Therefore we must help our people to learn to read and write and learn practical skills to help them make a living and become self reliant

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING MODE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

There are many challenges to Open and Distance Education in Papua New Guinea including the Education Sector in general. The Education budget each year has been stretched beyond limits. Education resources, both human and non-human, have been diverted to other social, economic and political sectors. Because of this, we must work together with our important stakeholders in order to achieve the goals of Distance Education in our country. If we are to achieve the goals of "Education for All" we must re-examine conventional ideas as the first step towards genuine progress which covers all levels of education from early childhood to adult learning and skills training. Such progress depends on encouraging educators to break down traditional attitudes towards formal education and to encourage more flexibility in the use of space, time and modern technologies.

During the 1990s, the Education Reform Plan changed the face of Education in Papua New Guinea. The Visions of the National Higher Education Plan II (NHEP II), 2000 to 2004 and the National Education Plan for 2005 to 2014 focuses on the importance of Papua New Guineans harnessing all appropriate and affordable technologies to pursue Flexible, Open and Distance Education opportunities.

Distance Education has the potential to reach broader audience at lower cost to the client in addition, it has the potential to address the difficulties of distance and terrain in the delivery of education services to all Papua New Guineans. This will be achieved by reviewing and revitalizing the existing college, its provincial centres and by private providers. Remote rural primary schools will also benefit from the development of distance programs.

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION PLAN FOR 2005 - 2014

Priorities in Education are Basic Education and Literacy, Vocational and Technical Education, Secondary and Flexible, Open Distance Education and Tertiary Education under the National Education Plan for 2005 to 2014. The existing colleges will be reviewed and revitalized to provide demand driven programs that are cost effective and also address the difficulties of terrain and distance.

According to the plan the restructured colleges will initially target Grades 6 to 8 students.

Enrolment in Grades 9 to 10 will cater for 25% of the students who are not offered a place or do not wish to take up a place in a secondary school.

The curriculum and assessment programs offered by the college will be based on the National curriculum, although the institution is free to include value added program as a result, students who wish to do any part of their secondary education through distance education will be able to transfer to and from education system schools.

Human resource development is a top priority of the national government of Papua New Guinea. The government instigated an Education Sector Review to rectify the problems, which had become endemic in the education system since independence. The effective implementation of the reforms will depend on the energetic participation of all stakeholders in education.

The Government of Papua New Guinea supports the Development of distance education and flexible learning modes of education that is cost-effective and quality models because it will increase access to higher education can increase enrolment and improve the quality of learning through the National Education.

THE COLLEGE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The College of Distance Education has been providing secondary level education on a correspondence basis since 1956 in Papua New Guinea. Originally it was conceived as a means by which working public servants could upgrade their qualifications. Until 1964 the College used courses prepared in Queensland, Australia.

In 1981, the Committee of Standards stated that the purpose of the CODE is to provide a continuing system of education, alternative to that of the formal school system, for those who, for one reason or another, have been unable to pursue the latter. The College provides an education for those people who are unable to continue their studies through the formal system. To provide a means whereby without leaving the workforce, men and women can study and upgrade their qualifications.

The College operates through its Port Moresby based Headquarters and twenty provincial centers, which cater for two kinds of students:

1. Those who want to complete Grades 7-12 education and receive a certificate for each year successfully completed As in the formal school system, the final statement of achievement is the School Certificate.; and
2. Those who want to upgrade their existing high school qualifications and enroll in individual subjects for which they receive a letter of attainment upon successful completion.

The institution will also develop further adult education, adult literacy and short technical and vocational oriented courses taking advantage of the advances in the field of information communications technology.

POTENTIAL FOR DISTANCE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING FOR TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING.

TVET is a general term covering a multitude of training areas which is distinguished by different levels of skills training, objectives, subject matters, nature length of training and so forth. TVET involves different groups of people.

Distance and Flexible Learning has been described to be cost-effective mode of delivering education in the 21st century. The world has seen the phenomenal growth in communication technology, computer network and information technology. The integration of computers and computer networks, modern means of communications and diversity of information transfer allows teachers and students to access learning beyond the classroom. There is a growing feeling that we must make a fundamental shift from site-based education to user-based learning.

There is considerable potential for Distance and long life skilled Flexible Learning for TVET courses to assist in achieving the educational objectives of PNG. The population is dispersed through 20 provinces separated by mountains, seas, valleys and forests. Travel is difficult and expensive and in most cases the only practical means of transportation is by air. Regular schooling is difficult for some, impossible for others. Many of school leavers are unable to gain place to further their education in technical and vocational centers.

With the paradigm shift in favor of open learning, education becomes a commodity for all ages anywhere and everywhere accommodating continuous life-long education. Distance education can make an important contribution to the social, economic and especially in the light of rising youth employment to the educational goals of PNG.

It is almost impossible to achieve universal access to TVET course for both the youth and adults through the conventional delivery methods of education. Hence, it has become necessary to harness the mode of Distance and Flexible Learning to achieve the optimum training needs for the great majority of our people.

For PNG to remain true to its commitments to access and equity, distance education is the only cost-effective means available to offers a real option for the PNG education system to meet the growing need and demand among the population for greater access and equity to further their education and skills training.

Closer linkages with the Department of Community Development will be developed to support the vocational centres that are specializing in the provision of courses for the community. In particular, the concept of communities themselves being the principal agents for change will be supported through the establishment of community learning centres by the Department of Community Development.

VISION

The Education Department's refined vision is focus on Papua New Guineans harness all appropriate and affordable technologies to pursue flexible, open and distance education opportunities is a important way that appreciate Christian and Traditional values, and that prepare literate, skilled and healthy citizens by concentrating on growth and development of each individual's personal viability and character formation, while ensuring all can contribute to the peace and prosperity of the nation to achieve human development goals.

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