



BELIZE

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The Use of Open and Distance Learning in Belize

Introduction

Much of the development of a nation has been attributed to the education, health, as well as the livelihood of its people. The government of Belize has for years invested heavily in the education of its people, in an attempt to ensure the continued development of the country into the future. Today, many strides have been made and much accomplished through access to open and distance learning towards the growth and development of our country.

In 2013, after the nationalization of the Belize Telemedia Limited in 2010, for the first time, the telemedia company released its block on access to VOIP, in addition to reducing the overall cost of internet per bandwidth. Although in a recent survey of Caribbean countries, Belize had one of the highest charges per bandwidth of internet and the lowest speed. With a reduction in cost for increased bandwidth, many Belizeans can now afford to have access to internet in their homes. All schools in the country with access to telephone lines may also have internet access free of charge. With access comes the increase in the opportunities to harness the benefits of open and distance learning throughout much of the communities of the country.

eLearning

In an attempt to respond to the growing relevance of ICT in life and work, in July 2013 the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) eLearning specialist met with key personnel from the Ministry of Education of Education, Youth & Sports (MoEYS) to discuss the provision of technical assistance in developing an ICT in Education Strategy for Belize. The objectives of the ICT in Education Strategy are to strategically leverage the introduction of ICT into the Education System (including teacher education), to enhance access to and the quality and relevance of education. In March of 2014, work will continue with the MoEYS to develop a draft strategy that will be presented to stakeholders.

Open Schooling

In trying to provide education through an equitable approach to disadvantaged youths and women, Belize embarked on a pilot program of open schooling for young women and adults through the collaborative effort of the MoEYS, COL, University of Belize and others. In August of 2013, the Open School initiative was officially launched with the participation of

50 young girls and women. The continued development of this initiative will however be dependent on the amount of support that is obtained to continue to address the deficiencies of trained teachers in the relevant pedagogies of open and distance learning. Access to, and training, in the use and development of OER will be also be of great benefit to further the agenda of providing access to education for disadvantaged young men, women and girls.

Priorities for support from COL

Technical and vocational skills development in Belize is an integral goal of the Ministry of Education in improving the quality and relevance of education and training. Open and distance learning is seen as one of the means for providing access to vocational skills development opportunities for on-the-job training, as well as short-term training for job development and improvement and opportunities for young people. Within the country, there are varying elements of distance learning such as teachers travelling to the designated location of the students; however, the aspect of skills development is in the classroom environment, and there is mostly the use of distance learning platforms for posting of assignments and discussions. There is presently no infrastructural development in place to facilitate technology driven skills development outside of the traditional workshops within the vocational institutions. It is envisioned that it will be used as part of professional development for teachers in vocational education in the near future, and in the distant future as the demand for programs increase, to integrate skills development into the open school and vocational institutions as a part of program offering.

Through its firm commitment to sustainable rural development to enhance growth and address poverty, the Ministry of Agriculture aims to facilitate the development of the agriculture and food sectors into a viable and competitive entity that guarantees domestic food security, fight poverty and promote rural development. The department's four main thematic programs are: Livestock Development, Crop Development (Urban gardening), Fruit Tree and Marketing and Agro-processing; these are supported through the Extension Services, Agricultural Stations and a research center. The different programs provide vital services that include: farm visits, practical trainings, farmer field schools and capacity building workshops and training. Information and knowledge sharing is ensured through the use of brochures, training packages, a Ministry's website, press releases and others. The areas of interest expressed by agro-productive communities include; poverty alleviation, family farming systems, youth & gender equality, alternative livelihoods and income generation, improved food/nutrition and increase marketing and value adding.

To achieve some of its strategic goals in providing the relevant support and guidance to farmers to improve their ability to sustainably produce and compete, the interest expressed by the department of agriculture as priorities for the training of farmers through open and distance learning includes the promotion of an inclusive, competitive and sustainable agriculture and food sector, and the promoting of cross-cutting issues in the agriculture sector (climate change and variations).

The health sector in its continued efforts at education and training towards healthy communities, have seen during the past two years, a stagnation of initiatives and support through the Commonwealth of Learning. To revitalize the collaboration within the health sector, the Ministry of Health identifies strategic health planning and the development of a health policy as the two priority areas for open and distance learning program through the COL.

Conclusion

The development of a nation is measured by the empowerment of its people through increased access to affordable education for sustained livelihoods and health. In Belize, the increased internet bandwidth at a reduced cost to the public, and the availability of computers and internet in schools has allowed for more people to have access to technologies that may facilitate their development more than before. The challenge however, is to improve the capacities of the various sectors to maximize the use of these technologies to harness the opportunities that are available to achieve the desired development goals of the country. With the support of COL, achievement of the our goals towards nation building through the provision of equitable access for women and girls as well as sustained development will become the hallmark for the progress of Belize.

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