

PRIORITIES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION RESEARCH: OPINIONS OF EXPERTS AND PRACTITIONERS WITHIN THE COMMONWEALTH

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Introduction

The evolution of open and distance education from correspondence education which emerged over one and a half centuries ago has revolutionised education all parts of the world. Within the Commonwealth of nations, practically all the 54-member countries have embraced open and distance education as an instrument for mass education, human resource development and training. As a testimony to the tremendous pace and scope of development in open and distance learning, not only has it become an essential feature of the national education systems of Commonwealth countries, it has also resulted into the birth of some mega universities (Daniel, 1995). Indeed, to underscore its commitment to open and distance education,, the Commonwealth of nations founded The Commonwealth of Learning in 1987 with a mandate to encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education materials, expertise and technologies, and other resources for students throughout the Commonwealth and other countries.

Open and distance education as opposed to the conventional face-to-face system relates to the teaching and learning situation in which most of the teaching is conducted by a teacher/tutor/facilitator separated in space and time from the learner. Keegan (1993) has listed elements of distance education as separation of teacher and learner; influence of an educational organisation; use of media to link teacher and learner to educational content; two way exchange of communication; learners as individuals rather than grouped; and education as an industrialised form (Peters, 1994). In open and distance education, the expected outcomes of learning depend heavily on efficient and effective design of instructional materials to fit peculiar characteristics and needs of the adult learner (Jegade, 1992, 1998). The teaching of course content must also be done using appropriately selected media or technology to complement or supplement the print based materials. All these complex and inter-woven activities in the delivery of instruction at a distance aggregate to form enormous tasks which require extensive research effort to generate information which support and guide the accomplishment of the tasks.

The inclusion of research in almost any human endeavour indicates the significance attached to its utility value. Compared with research in conventional mode of education, research in open and distance education has neither been as pervasive, rigorous nor taken as very consequential if what obtains in the literature is anything to go by. A number of reasons might account for the paucity of research in open and distance education. First, the field of open and distance education is comparatively young and therefore requires time for maturity. Second, open and distance education providers and practitioners are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume, complexity and variety of activities involved in the provision of education at a distance. As a consequence, the time is not always available to address issues relating to research. Third, a related reason is the tendency to regard research as ancillary to distance education (Coldeway, 1990).

The above reasons could in part be responsible for Coldeway's criticism of distance education research as not planned, conducted, and or reported in a systematic manner. One other criticism is the lack of explicit philosophical paradigm driving distance education research. These lead to lack of priority, clear direction, poor research design and lack of focus, to mention but a few, and ultimately result in a paucity in quality and quantity of research reports on distance education. Yet, there is no gainsaying the fact that embarking on research illuminates the various transactions which go on in open and distance education. In particular, the choice of learning and teaching strategies, instructional design, development, production and delivery of instructional materials using any form of communications technologies or the multimedia approach would require that empirical evidence be generated to support their educational significance. This could only be done through enquiry.

Although the phenomenal development and uptake of open and distance education around the world has not been adequately matched by effort in research, the information available indicate that research is being given some mention within national or regional frameworks (Latchem, 1999). For example, American leaders in distance education got together for the first time in 1988 to review and discuss research in distance education (Moore, 1988). Moore is of the opinion that this was probably the first time that such group met for such a purpose anywhere in the world. A similar symposium (called Research in Distance Education –RIDE) held for the first time in Australia at Deakin University in 1989 and was followed by three others in 1991, 93, and 95. In the Latin American region, a workshop was organised in 1990 to analyse the results of research carried out to diagnose the current situation of distance education in the Americas (Villarroel, 1992). With regards to Africa, The first Pan-African meeting on distance education took place in Tanzania in 1990 under the auspices of UNESCO. The materials presented at the meeting pointed to the fact that information and research is one of the three important factors on which distance education in Africa depends. In India, the first comprehensive research project in distance education was launched six years ago by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (Singh, 1992).

These laudable developments which are additional to individual and institutional efforts in developing open and distance education research have their obstacles. As mentioned above the management and provision of open and distance education heavily tasks the time of practitioners who would otherwise have liked to undertake research. With regard to the practical difficulties of carrying out research, Calvert (1986) is of the view that two factors are contributory. One factor relates to newcomers to the field who have roots in other disciplines and would need to be 'retooled' for research in open and distance education even though they have solid research skills in their disciplines. The second relates to the open and distance education systems which place emphasis on doing, rather than on contemplation and in which most practitioners are administrators carrying heavy workload. Although Calvert (1986) is concerned that the research climate for, and that issues facing, distance education are not being addressed adequately through research, there is evidence that positive changes are occurring. An examination of the literature would reveal that a lot of research through individual effort exists as part of general education research literature and special publications in open and distance education. The emergence of top rate periodicals and journals has given rise to wider reporting and involvement of research in open and distance education. Holmberg (1989) is of the belief that developments of open and distance education in Europe have been based largely on research efforts in educational technology, programme instruction, and curriculum development. Indeed research effort in four Commonwealth countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and United Kingdom) outweigh the collective output of other parts of the world combined.

However, some important the issues need to be addressed in spite of the increasing number of research activities in open and distance education. One of such issues is that of structure and organisation of research in a more co-ordinated and systematised manner. The second is information to answer effectively questions about areas of primary and priority concerns within national, institutional and other frameworks. These issues need urgent and serious attention because as Bates (1984) suggests, open and distance education will be the primary mode of education in the future and nations, including those within the Commonwealth, are looking to it for a substantial contribution to ward national development. A systematic way for defining goals and evaluating achievements through research regarding the educational needs of society appears therefore to merit some attention. A field such as open and distance education which demands constant review, practical decisions for effective delivery of instruction amongst many other considerations, would require that enquiry be systematised and prioritised to generate worthwhile information needed for ploughing back into the system.

Although some would argue that future developments of open and distance education do not require a co-ordinated effort to establish research priorities (Parer and Benson, 1990), and that significant breakthroughs in research have seldom been made within a prioritised or co-ordinated environment, the special nature of open and distance education suggests otherwise. Reasons supporting the need for co-ordination and prioritisation include (i) the need to maximise effort and to assure effectiveness and concertedness, (ii) escalating demand on open and distance education (Evans, 1992), (iii) setting priorities to guide areas to place concentration of research effort, (iv) the need for researchers, practitioners and policy makers to engage in constant dialogue about the role of research and desirable areas to focus upon. All these would require that the views of practitioners and experts in open and distance education be sought for definitive information regarding research in open and distance education.

The primary purpose of this study therefore, was to investigate the opinions of the community of experts and practitioners in open and distance education around the world regarding the availability of research information, areas in which research efforts should be concentrated, and the order of priority to be given to such research areas. This paper reports on the data relating to the sample sub-set from the Commonwealth countries, as part of an international study conducted in all regions of the world on open and distance education research concentration and priorities.

Methodology

Sample

All the distance educators and practitioners who are registered as individual members of the International Council for Distance Education formed the population of the study. Using the current individual membership list at the time of study, 200 members were randomly selected across the various regions of the world as sample. 131 of these open and distance educators and practitioners are based in Commonwealth countries spread across the following Commonwealth countries: Australia, Bangladesh, Botswana, Canada, Fiji, Ghana, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Lesotho, Malaysia, Mauritius, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa, United Kingdom, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Instrumentation and Procedure of Administration

The instrument consisted of a five-page questionnaire divided into five sections. Section A related to biographical details while sections B, C and D sought opinions on level of research information, where research effort should be concentrated upon, and areas needing priority research attention respectively within open and distance education. Section B sought responses to the 22 items contained in the section on a five-point Likert type scales of ‘Adequate Information Available’, ‘Barely Adequate Information Available’, ‘Little Information Available’, ‘No Information Available’, and ‘Don’t Know’ scored as 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. Section C also sought responses to the 22 items contained in the section on a five-point Likert-type scale of ‘Commence Research’, ‘More Research Needed’, ‘Less Research Needed’, ‘No More Research Needed’, and ‘Don’t Know’ scored as 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. Section D sought responses to the 22 items contained in the section on a three-point Likert-type scale of ‘High Priority’, ‘Medium Priority’, and ‘Low Priority’ scored as, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. Section E required respondents to rank the difficulties faced with research in open and distance education. The instrument underwent a series of validation by a panel of judges selected from a cross section of experts in open and distance education, research methodology, communications and data analysis. The questionnaire was mailed to the subjects of the sample within a 3-day period accompanied by a letter requesting that they send the questionnaire back as soon as completed. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient of the final questionnaire was calculated to be .89

Results and Findings

Of the 131 questionnaires mailed out, 75 were returned representing 57 percent response rate. Thirteen returned questionnaires were discounted due to factors such as incomplete number of pages sent back, more than half the items not responded to. 62 duly completed questionnaires from a total of 23 countries were finally accepted for data processing. The sample contained 41 males and 21 females. The results of the data analysis on the opinions of experts in the Commonwealth countries are as shown in Tables 1 to 4. The analysis of the frequency of responses to the items in the various sections of the questionnaire indicated that majority of the experts are of the opinion that the level of information available from research in distance education is inadequate (see Table 1). More than 50 percent of the respondents agreed that more research is needed in all areas as shown in Table 2 while they rated the areas of Evaluation (61.9%), Development of Students Study Skills (60.7%) and Professional Development of Distance Educators (59%) as requiring the highest priority research attention. The areas of Teacher Education (43.3%) and Theory and Philosophy (28.8%) were judged by the experts as requiring lowest priority in research (see Table 3).

Table 1: Frequency tabulation of responses of experts in the Commonwealth regarding the level of information available for the different broad groupings in open and distance education

Broad Groupings of Research Areas	Adequate Information available	Barely adequate information available	Little information available	No information available	Don’t know
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	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1 Theory and philosophy	23	(37.7)	18	(29.5)	15	(24.6)	1	(1.6)	4	(6.6)
2 Learner characteristics	20	(32.3)	16	(25.8)	22	(35.5)	0	0.0	4	(6.5)
3 Equity and access (compensating for disadvantage)	6	(9.7)	15	(24.2)	20	(32.3)	6	(9.7)	15	(24.2)
4 Design and development of study materials	11	(20.8)	30	(56.6)	11	(20.8)	0	0.0	1	(1.9)
5 Instructional & communications technology	18	(28.6)	24	(38.1)	15	(23.8)	0	0.0	6	(9.5)
6 Teleteaching and learning	15	(23.8)	22	(34.9)	17	(27.0)	3	(4.8)	6	(9.5)
7 Management and planning	14	(22.2)	23	(36.5)	21	(33.3)	1	(1.6)	4	(6.3)
8 Student support services	18	(28.6)	24	(38.1)	16	(25.4)	2	(3.2)	3	(4.8)
9 Development of students study skills	12	(19.4)	23	(37.1)	23	(37.1)	1	(1.6)	3	(4.8)
10 Systems for the provision of feedback to students	9	(18.0)	26	(52.0)	11	(22.0)	0	0.0	4	(8.0)
11 Interactive multimedia	11	(17.2)	24	(37.5)	20	(31.3)	4	(6.3)	5	(7.8)
12 Discipline based context	4	(6.7)	14	(23.3)	26	(43.3)	4	(6.7)	12	(20.0)
13 Cognition and metacognition	8	(12.7)	13	(20.6)	18	(28.6)	8	(12.7)	16	(25.4)
14 Cost benefit analysis	5	(7.8)	22	(34.4)	26	(40.6)	4	(6.3)	7	(10.9)
15 Relationship between open learning and distance education	10	(14.1)	21	(29.6)	24	(33.8)	4	(5.6)	12	(16.9)
16 Industrial and Business training context	3	(4.7)	18	(28.1)	25	(39.1)	4	(6.3)	14	(21.9)
17 Research methodology	21	(32.8)	17	(26.6)	23	(35.9)	0	0.0	3	(4.7)
18 Evaluation	21	(32.8)	23	(35.9)	17	(26.6)	3	(4.7)	0	0.0
19 Expert learning systems	6	(9.5)	13	(20.6)	25	(39.7)	8	(12.7)	11	(17.5)
20 Role of distance education in national development	12	(18.8)	20	(31.3)	23	(35.9)	4	(6.3)	5	(7.8)
21 Teacher education	22	(34.9)	22	(34.9)	14	(22.2)	2	(3.2)	3	(4.8)
22 Professional development of distance education	10	(15.6)	19	(29.7)	25	(39.1)	5	(7.8)	5	(7.8)

Table 2: Frequency tabulation of responses of experts in the Commonwealth regarding the areas in open and distance education requiring concentration of research effort

Broad Groupings of Research Areas	Commen ce Research		More Research needed		Less Research needed		No more Research needed		Don't know	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1 Theory and philosophy	7	(11.9)	32	(54.2)	14	(23.7)	2	(3.4)	4	(6.8)
2 Leaner characteristics	4	(6.6)	46	(75.4)	10	(16.4)	0	0.0	1	(1.6)
3 Equity and access (compensating for disadvantage)	12	(19.7)	33	(54.1)	6	(9.8)	2	(3.3)	8	(13.1)
4 Design and development of study materials	3	(4.8)	52	(83.9)	7	(11.3)	0	0.0	0	0.0
5 Instructional & communications technology	4	(6.3)	53	(82.8)	2	(3.1)	3	(4.7)	2	(3.1)
6 Teleteaching and learning	4	(6.5)	42	(67.7)	7	(11.3)	4	(6.5)	5	(8.1)
7 Management and planning	8	(13.6)	36	(61.0)	10	(16.9)	1	(1.7)	4	(6.8)

8	Student support services	4	(7.0)	41	(71.9)	6	(10.5)	2	(3.5)	4	(7.0)
9	Development of students study skills	9	(14.8)	46	(75.4)	4	(6.6)	2	(3.3)	0	0.0
10	Systems for the provision of feedback to students	6	(9.7)	46	(74.2)	4	(6.5)	1	(1.6)	5	(8.1)
11	Interactive multimedia	11	(18.0)	38	(62.3)	3	(4.9)	4	(6.6)	5	(8.2)
12	Discipline based context	8	(13.8)	29	(50.0)	10	(17.2)	2	(3.4)	9	(15.5)
13	Cognition and metacognition	7	(12.3)	34	(59.6)	4	(7.0)	1	(1.8)	11	(19.3)
14	Cost benefit analysis	10	(16.4)	39	(63.9)	5	(8.2)	4	(6.6)	3	(4.9)
15	Relationship between open learning and distance education	4	(6.7)	40	(66.7)	7	(11.7)	4	(6.7)	5	(8.3)
16	Industrial and business training context	10	(17.2)	31	(53.4)	7	(12.1)	1	(1.7)	9	(15.5)
17	Research methodology	8	(13.8)	37	(63.8)	7	(12.1)	4	(6.9)	2	(3.4)
18	Evaluation	9	(14.5)	45	(72.6)	4	(6.5)	3	(4.8)	1	(1.6)
19	Expert learning systems	8	(13.8)	32	(55.2)	7	(12.1)	3	(5.2)	8	(13.8)
20	Role of distance education in national development	12	(19.7)	33	(54.1)	9	(14.8)	0	0.0	7	(11.5)
21	Teacher education	3	(5.2)	37	(63.8)	9	(15.5)	4	(6.9)	5	(8.6)
22	Professional development										

With regard to ranking the difficulties researchers in open and distance education often face, Time Allocation, Funding and Lack of Personal Interest in Research Projects were the three greatest difficulties nominated (see Table 4).

The comparison of the results on the basis the independent variables of gender, present position at work, areas of specialisation, highest qualification, etc, did not yield any significant differences when submitted to ANOVA.

Table 3: Frequency tabulation of responses of experts in developing the Commonwealth regarding the areas in open and distance education requiring priority research attention

Broad Groupings of Research Areas		High Priority		Medium Priority		Low Priority	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1	Student support services	33	(54.1)	26	(42.6)	2	(3.3)
2	Industrial and business training context	24	(40.7)	22	(37.3)	13	(22.0)
3	Equity and Access (compensating for disadvantage)	29	(46.8)	22	(35.5)	11	(17.7)
4	Discipline based context	18	(33.3)	26	(48.1)	10	(18.5)
5	Expert leaning systems	19	(33.3)	28	(49.1)	10	(17.5)
6	Professional development of distance educators	36	(59.0)	18	(29.5)	7	(11.5)
7	Theory and philosophy	17	(28.8)	25	(42.4)	17	(28.8)
8	Development of students study skills	37	(60.7)	19	(31.1)	5	(8.2)
9	Cognition and metacognition	19	(33.3)	23	(40.4)	15	(26.3)
10	Role of distance education in national development	34	(55.7)	18	(29.5)	9	(14.8)
11	Management and planning	35	(56.5)	20	(32.3)	7	(11.3)
12	Learner characteristics	27	(43.5)	30	(48.4)	5	(8.1)

13	Systems & the provision of feedback to students	34	(54.8)	23	(37.1)	5	(8.1)
14	Cost benefit analysis	29	(46.8)	27	(43.5)	6	(9.7)
15	Teacher education	9	(15.0)	25	(41.7)	26	(43.3)
16	Design and development of study materials	36	(58.1)	24	(38.7)	2	(3.2)
17	Evaluation	39	(61.9)	20	(31.7)	4	(6.3)
18	Instructional & communications technology	36	(57.1)	21	(33.3)	6	(9.5)
19	Interactive multimedia	27	(44.3)	26	(42.6)	8	(13.1)
20	Relationship between open learning & DE	15	(21.4)	39	(55.7)	16	(22.9)
21	Teleteaching and learning	23	(39.7)	25	(43.1)	10	(17.2)
22	Research methodology	25	(39.7)	26	(41.3)	12	(19.0)

Table 4: Rank ordering of difficulties faced by experts in the Commonwealth countries with undertaking research in open and distance education

Difficulties with Research	Rank Order
Competency in research methodology	9
Access to relevant literature	5
Funding	2
Professional advice	7
Finding the right audience	8
Time Allocation	1
Technical advice	13
Lack of personal interest in research projects	3
Finding a researchable problem	4
Lack of my institution's interest in my research efforts	6
Report writing	11
Political interference	14
Research project management	12
Lack of personal enhancement from research	10
Others (please state)	15

Summary and Implications

The results of the study have indicated that distance education experts around the Commonwealth are of the opinion that (a) we do not have anywhere near adequate level of information from research, (b) we need to embark on more research in all areas of distance education, and (c) priority should be given to the areas of Evaluation, and Systems for the provision of Feedback to Students. The experts are also of the opinion that Time Allocation, Funding and Lack of Personal Interest in Research Projects are the three greatest difficulties encountered in research. Four major implications are obvious amongst many, from these results. First, relatively very little has been accomplished by way of research in open and distance education and there is therefore a need to embark on research into all areas of distance education, Second, the low level or near absence of research neither provides practitioners with valuable information nor an empirically rooted basis for actions and decisions in the effort to provide education at a distance to the teeming population requesting for it. Third, the difficulties nominated by experts as militating against undertaking research in the Commonwealth need to be tackled in a unified global manner. Last but not the least is, as mentioned by Moore (1988), there is an academic need for review and analysis of research and for the organisation of a research agenda for open and distance education practitioners and providers. If the future of open and distance education belongs to research as is being suggested, perhaps this is the area which should command the greatest attention of all those involved in the field within the Commonwealth.

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