

Flexibility, in distance and time: a focus on Papua New Guinea secondary education

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Abstract

Today we experience the effects of globalization, as well as knowledge era. Globalization has brought the world closer and has evolved around the need for maximum reachout. Whereas knowledge era has played an instrumental role in creating a knowledge society. The 'knowledge' society necessitates easy access to and sharing of knowledge. In a way it is a process of building learning communities.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) provides an opportunity to build learning communities by taking knowledge to the doorstep of the learners. Universal education, lifelong education, continuous updating and innovation are needed for survival in the present age. Distance education meets many of the challenges, through a variety of innovative educational models in information communication technology (ICT) vocational, behavioral, management skills and teacher training are the likely tools for the future hopes of our nation. ODL offers numerous benefits to individuals, organizations and even to society in general.

There is much to gain from the intelligent use of appropriate technologies, especially broadcast communications based on satellite installations. Such technologies, when used in the context of well-structured distance education captions, can provide cost-effective remotes and deprived communities in the rural areas while at the same time enrolling formal school systems.

1. Introduction

Without vision, the prophets say, a nation perishes. So it is with our global community. Decisions about our future must be made now, as we span the next century. But these decisions must not begin with the traditional approach of designing and specifying physical targets or material wealth. Rather, our global vision must start with the prioritization of the values that ensure fullest development of mankind. The beneficiaries of this decision ought to be the most underprivileged members of underdeveloped societies: the poorest and the most destitute and the deprived members of our citizenry – the rural poor, particularly children and women.

Flexibility, in distance and time in Papua New Guinea traditional context, is a normal every day style of life.

Those of you who have been to PNG may have come across expressions that describe our style of life. I will mention the two most popular and significant ones only. They are: firstly,- PNG the Land of the Unexpected and secondly, PNG Time.

PNG the Land of the Unexpected defines the style of relaxing and peaceful mind of going one day at a time, and take things as they come. Sometimes, this may be referred to as an explanation of the PULL between Traditional Society and its norms and the Modern and Cash Wave of Life.

PNG Time is an expression of Papua New Guineans going about a days work with less pressure of Time. It has its origin with Traditional Way of life. In PNG Traditional Society, they tell the time by Day and Night, or Sun during the day and and Moon in the night. There is only, Early Morning, Morning, Noon, Afternoon, Early Night, Late Night each day.

Papua New Guinea comprises over 600 islands but 85 per cent of its land area of 463 840 sq km is on the mainland. This is mostly covered by tropical rain forests and divided by massive mountain ranges.

The population is about 5.2 million and 85 per cent live in rural areas. Over 800 different languages are spoken throughout the 20 provinces. The population that is growing at the rate of 2.7 per cent per annum is predicted to reach 7.5 million by 2020.

According to 2000 census, 45 per cent of the population is estimated to be below the age of 15 years.

Papua New Guinea has a highly decentralized education system. By 2003, the system has 33 000 teachers, and almost 1000000 students in 4000 elementary schools, 3300 primary schools, 170 secondary schools and 140 vocational schools.

Thus from Papua New Guinea perspective, if we are to achieve the goals of "Education for All" by the next decade, we must begin to re-examine conventional ideas as the first step towards achieving genuine progress. 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.

2. Learning

Distance education is directed towards the learner. Its focus of attention is the learner and the process of learning, unlike traditional pedagogy where the concentration is on the teacher and on teaching. This is because the elimination of a fixed time (daily classes) and a fixed space (the schoolhouse) enables learners to learn at their own convenience, without disrupting the everyday necessities of work, whether at home, farm, village, factory, school or office.

It is clear that the distance education materials, tools and technologies chosen must suit the needs of the learner – not the preferences of the teacher. Distance education encourages teachers to see that what really matters is facilitation of learning, not dogmatic instruction.

Improvement in the quality of education depends on making available to the poorest students and the most far-flung schools the best available teaching talents of the country. This problem can be handled quite effectively through distance education since this mode encourages the mobilization of the best and most competent teacher in a given subject.

Distance education can accommodate this problem by placing the learner at the centre of the curriculum development process. By focusing on the actual learning environments and specific needs of disadvantaged groups and by making the best use of today's technologies, we can make the necessary quantum leaps in education. There is much to gain from the intelligent use of appropriate technologies, especially broadcast communications based on satellite installations. Such technologies, when used in the context of well-structured distance education systems, can provide cost-effective delivery systems which can reach out to the remotest and deprived communities in the rural areas while at the same time enriching formal school systems.

3. Innovation

It is essential that educational policymakers re-examine their commitment to traditional formal schooling and consider seriously the efficacy and cost-efficiency of multi-media distance education technologies. The financial resource implications alone are surely debilitating. With the economics of scale inherent in mass distance education, however, the achievement of universal primary education is within the bounds of reality, provided the policy planners are willing to consider alternative modes of instruction such as distance education and incorporating multimedia technologies.

The expansion and diversification of distance education programs to meet the growing demand for education at all levels requires new strategies to minimize costs. There is a need for pooling expertise and sharing resources in the field of distance education in order to maximize benefits.

One of the new strategies of education could entail not having children come to the school, but having the school reach out to the children and enter their very houses. This is now possible because of the pervasive influence of broadcast media, particularly radio, which can reach virtually all corners of the world today. The means of listening to radio broadcasts is now almost universal. Farmers in copra, coffee and tea plantations in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, in the paddy fields in Morobe and Western Provinces of Papua New Guinea, or tending to sheep, cows and goats in the countryside, are now able to listen to radio broadcasts day and night prices within their reach. The hut, the farm field, the fishing canoe, the village gathering place can all constitute the new classroom, the new school, and can create genuine access to educational opportunities. Similarly, the use of radio for educational purposes allows students, to continue their farm and home chores without disruption, while they assimilate lessons from broadcasts. With the additional provision of distance education support services, including print materials, scheduled tutorials and lectures on-site, group work sessions, etc., students can develop enthusiasm and commitment for learning with the ultimate goal of becoming self-reliant.

Going beyond employment and livelihood, distance education could be used to teach dozens of relevant topics, including community mobilization and organization; rural leadership training; home industries; village-level planning and development; home food processing; environmental protection and conservation; family values and solidarity; population education; local government administration; setting up and managing farmers' and conducting local training programs using local people and local materials.

4. Collaboration

The growing trend towards the use of distance education in the region is extremely encouraging and potentially useful for countries like PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu which have little experience in distance education. The development of distance education will not be possible unless adequate resources are made available from external agencies since the possibility of meeting the expenses required from the national budget is extremely limited. PNG would therefore welcome both regional and international cooperation for the development of a distance education system in the country. Such cooperation could include: provision of funding for creating the physical infrastructure for distance education, supply of necessary equipment, provision of fellowships for international and regional training of staff, provision of fellowships for study tours by planners and policymakers and provision of expatriate consultants.

5. Foundations

PNG is implementing various projects with a view to achieving comprehensive development of the country. However, the successful implementation of these projects is constrained by the shortage of technical and vocational manpower. To this end, there is a need to expand technical education and vocational training to meet the growing need for such manpower. Similarly, there is a need to provide easy access to education and training opportunities for women to raise their status in the society. It would appear to be difficult to meet all these needs unless distance education methodologies are used. There is an apparent need to use distance learning technology in order to achieve universal primary education by the year 2020, impart necessary training to teachers, provide access to higher education by high school graduates, impart functional literacy education to illiterate adults, impart technical educational and vocational training to out of school youths and adults, and to improve the participation rate of women in education and training.

Distance education, unlike formal schooling, allows the educational system to progress without waiting for economic development. Traditionally expensive campuses and schoolhouses could not be built without first waiting for communities to advance in their economic and physical wealth. This approach led to policies that deprived remote and poor communities of basic educational facilities particularly in the rural areas where the largest number of people lived and worked. Distance education, based on the use of a multimedia strategy, can reach out to millions of poor families. It can help

them in their livelihood and employment by providing them with livelihood skills, farm production technologies, fishing methods, food-processing know-how, and hundreds of other employment enabling tools and techniques. Distance education has the capacity to reach thousands and thousands of poor communities, at costs much less than formal schooling.

Distance education informs learners that learning depends on themselves, on their own motivation to learn, on their commitment to learn the lessons on their own, with guidance and support from tutors and learning materials. Distance education requires an act of self-discipline. It is a purposeful testing of self-reliance and self-determination. It informs learners that not all knowledge and facts come directly from the teacher. It informs them that most knowledge, perceptions and insights come only from their own actions. In the end, the distance learner comes to realize that the best teacher is really oneself, and that personal efforts in this connection are the most important. In essence, distance education leads to the liberation of the learner, since liberation and knowledge are not only compatible but interdependent. It provides opportunities for self-determination which can lead to the development of self-reliance and thereby to the enhancement of self-esteem and personal dignity. And through the liberation of the individual comes the liberation of the nation.

CONCLUSION

Development goal shifts from mere income or economic growth as an end, to that of the growth of people, and enhancing the quality of human conditions. Thus, the Eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) developed by the United Nations and to which Papua New Guinea has committed itself, are directly and indirectly related to educational opportunities.

Therefore, in our effort to achieve development goals both nationally and internationally, our common freedom must be fully appreciated and manifested through and in any collaborative work among our family of nations. We see this as the way to go into the future, and for the enhancement of our common wealth, which is people. Our bearing must be focused on human development that has holistic learning as the central factor of character formation and capacity building. That is, educating people for life.

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