

Open and Distance Learning in Small States: Which Models?



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A public lecture by
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Introduction

It is a very special pleasure to be back in Mauritius and I thank you for the invitation to give this public lecture. This is a unique occasion for me because I first came to Mauritius as a consultant for the Commonwealth of Learning back in 1989, just after COL had been set up. My task then was to advise the Government of Mauritius about how it might use distance education and I wrote a report entitled *Distance Education for Human Resource Development in Mauritius: The Way Forward*. I retain excellent memories of that mission and it has been a pleasure, in recent days, to visit again some of the Mauritian institutions who helped me with that report.

Now here I am back again, sixteen years later, as President of the Commonwealth of Learning, to speak to you on the topic *Open and Distance Learning in Small States: Which Models?* You could say that history is repeating itself!

Before I start there are two other consequences of that first visit to Mauritius that I should mention. When I came here in 1989 as a COL consultant I was the President of Laurentian University, a dual-mode university serving North-Eastern Ontario, Canada. I am very proud that one of the legacies of my visit was a close link between Laurentian and the University of Mauritius that spawned numerous exchanges to facilitate the creation of the J. Baguant Centre for Distance Learning at the University of Mauritius, which has done such a good job since its creation.

The second consequence, more a coincidence, was that your Minister of Education of Mauritius in 1989 was Armoogum Parsuramen. I think he was the youngest person ever to hold that post. A decade later Mr. Parsuramen and I were colleagues when, in 2001, I became Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO and he was the Director of BREDA, UNESCO's Bureau régional pour l'éducation en Afrique, in Dakar, Senegal. He moved to the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris just as I moved to Vancouver to my

post at the Commonwealth of Learning, but we did some productive work together. Indeed, we worked together during my most recent visit to Mauritius, which the meeting of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, ADEA, held at Grand Baie in December 2003.

So I'm delighted to be here again. Through my prior reading and by conversations in the last few days I find that my 1989 report made a difference. That pleases me because one of early passages in the report read as follows:

"This report is about distance education - sometimes called open learning. What, it may fairly be asked, can either do for Mauritius? The country is a 2000 sq. km. island with no distances. Its examination-oriented education system is tightly closed."

Since I wrote that report, maybe partly as a consequence of it, Mauritius has embraced distance education with determination and success. I should therefore apologise for the doubts implicit in another passage of the report which said:

"We admire the patient manner in which Mauritians let external consultants take up their time, first to respond to questions in an interview and then to put out any fires that the consultant's report may light. As one more in a long line of consultants to education in Mauritius we could not help thinking that the country may be making excessive use of this mechanism. A succession of consultants' reports creates at least uncertainty, if not confusion. Furthermore, waiting for the next consultant's report can become a substitute for local decision making and action."

Clearly there has been local action and I congratulate you on that. Decisions were made and, in general, you have followed the evolutionary path that I recommended, expanding and coordinating the work of existing institutions rather than creating new ones - at least for distance education.

However, I'm not going to launch into an analysis of the last 16 years in Mauritius and compare it to what I recommended in 1989. That would be both foolish - because there is a lot I don't know about the present situation - and arrogant because my 1989 report was the result of a short visit, even if it did reflect consultations with a large number of Mauritians, some of whom are in this room now.

What I shall do is to look at the field of distance education generally and ask what has changed and what has not changed since 1989. This will lead me to comment directly on my subject, namely the appropriate models for open and distance learning in small states. I shall conclude with an account of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, in which both Mauritius and COL are involved, and then finally risk a few comments about what you should do next.

The Changing ODL scene: What's in a Name?

My first question is how is open and distance learning changing in response to the changing world around us?

The most obvious change is a profusion of new vocabulary. It seems that practitioners in this field are particularly prone to terminological flatulence. This, of course, is a tradition. Before the term open and distance learning came into general use we used to talk of external studies or correspondence education. When we changed the name of the International Council for Correspondence Education to the International Council for Distance Education in 1982 you could feel the earth move. Since then the trickle of terms has turned into a flood. We now have blended learning, flexible learning, virtual learning, eLearning, technology-enhanced learning, web-based learning, mLearning, iLearning and so on.

I suppose that this effervescence of nomenclature denotes a lively field of endeavour, but it also confuses people. My own observation, which may annoy some of you, is that although each new term may begin by denoting something new and different, pretty soon that something evolves into a method of teaching and learning than can fit comfortably under the wide umbrella of open and distance learning: ODL.

Take eLearning, for instance. Six years ago, when the dotcom frenzy was at its height, some were so transfixed by the possibilities of learning through connected computers that they launched new institutions devoted solely to teaching in this way. Most of them either folded for lack of interest or evolved into a multi-media approach that included some human contact and even the odd book. I do not find this surprising.

That is because what has not changed is the way that people learn. Very simply, we learn in two ways. We can learn independently, which you are doing now as you listen to me - if you are listening - or which you do when you read a book, watch television, listen to your iPod, or work at a computer. Most of our learning is independent learning, the more so as we get older.

But learning can often be enhanced by interactive learning, where another human being reacts to what we do by answering a question, challenging our point of view or commenting on the essay we have written. Effective learning requires a blend of both independent and interactive learning, with the proportions changing with the circumstances.

How to get the right blend?

The fundamental challenge for distance educators is to blend independent and interactive learning activities in ways that are pedagogically effective and economically viable. Economic viability is obviously important and it cannot be taken for granted because independent activities and interactive activities have different cost structures when you plot total cost against student numbers.

The independent activities can yield great economies of scale because the materials on which they depend are cheap to reproduce once you have made the first copy. Creating the infrastructure needed to make the first copy requires an upfront investment, which is why the curve starts well up the vertical axis.

But interactive activities depend on people. The initial cost of one tutor is low, but as student numbers

grow the total cost of hiring tutors to facilitate interactive learning will grow faster than the total cost of independent activities. You can see that, in principle, by blending independent and interactive activities in different ways you can get the cost curve you want. This, of course, is the key to the success of the large open universities.

The conundrum facing education throughout history has been to break out of what I call the iron triangle. This is made up of the three vectors that all ministers of education want to pursue: wide access, high quality and low cost. For systems based only on classroom teaching this triangle is a massive constraint. Attempts to increase access by putting more students in each class will attract accusations of lowering quality. Raising quality by providing better learning materials and training teachers more intensively will raise costs, and so on.

But when practised intelligently distance education is revolutionary because it allows us to reshape this triangle. Thanks to the cost curves that I just showed, you can increase access, improve quality and cut costs - all at the same time.

This is a revolution because it allows us to break, once and for all, the insidious link between quality and exclusiveness that has been the bugbear of education throughout history. I mean the idea that you could only provide quality education if you exclude most people from it. That principle, of course, has been applied in Mauritius, as it has around the world, for most of your history.

But, of course, this brings us to the Small State problem. The reason that the UK Open University is now ranks at fifth place amongst the hundred or so British universities for the quality of its teaching programmes - just above Oxford, my own alma mater - is that with nearly 200,000 students it enjoys great economies of scale and can make large investments in quality.

And there, of course, is the challenge for small states. It was this question of scale - reaching the critical mass to take advantage of open and distance learning - that led the education ministers of the Commonwealth's small states to propose a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth in 2000.

Changing Technology

I shall come back to that in a moment. But first I want to highlight a very important set of changes that have taken place since 1989 and which put the small states in a much more favourable position. I refer to the evolution of technology. You all live with evolving technology so my description can be brief and telegraphic. What has changed? Here is a partial list in no particular order.

First, connectivity - a word no one used back in 1989. We can connect ourselves to computer and communications systems easily and increasingly cheaply. I accept that the connectivity nirvana has not yet arrived for many of your neighbours in Africa, but it is coming.

Second, computers are being demystified and the gate-keeping power of software vendors - no pun intended - is diminishing as the notion of free open source software becomes a present reality.

Third, data storage has become dramatically easier. DVDs are splendid things and I myself am particularly enamoured of the flash disk, or data stick and hardly ever leave home without one.

Fourth, and this is a very partial list, I mention mobile telephones. If this talk bores you, you can discreetly phone someone more interesting and chat to them. You couldn't have done that in 1989.

What does this evolving technology enable us to do? More particularly, what does it enable you to do in small states that you couldn't do before? Again, here is a partial list in no particular order.

The consequences of changing technology

First, you can find information and knowledge much more easily - call this the Google phenomenon, which just keeps getting better. You can access more contemporary knowledge electronically from your home or your Internet café than you can physically at the University of Mauritius library. Information access is becoming a level playing field.

Second, you can communicate rapidly. Electronic submission and marking of assignments is a huge step forward for distance learning, where the importance of rapid feedback on students' work is well known. Of course, the tutors must be organised to take advantage of it, but the potential is there.

Third, reproducing and distributing documents and pictures have become much cheaper. Of particular importance for you is the development of open educational resources, which means open course content, open source software and tools. These will be a crucial asset to the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

Fourth, mobile phones are wonderful for keeping in touch with students through SMS communications about administrative matters - if not for studying whole course. The book is still a brilliant mobile communication device.

Fifth, through both telephony and the Web it is easy to get small groups of students together in a virtual manner, either synchronously or asynchronously.

I see two consequences of these changes, one of special interest to you, the other more general. Of special interest to you is the impact of these changes on the feasibility of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth and on the viability of distance education with smaller groups of students.

My more general - and also more tentative - conclusion is that through these developments open and distance learning may actually define the new university of the 21st century, rather than being viewed by many in the academy as a peripheral approach that has to be tolerated because it takes some of the

pressure off conventional universities to increase access.

Earlier I talked about the terminology of distance education. The key concept in the new role that I perceive is open learning rather than distance education. Technology-mediated open learning is more in tune with the behaviour of 21st century students than the offerings of campus institutions. Today's students want to take control of their learning environment, to be constantly interacting and in contact with each other, they attack multiple tasks in a short space of time and they are ill at ease with the linear narrative style of traditional academic discourse.

This new world of open content and mobile interactivity, which enable them to construct their own learning, fits their style well. Because it is not constrained by an investment in buildings and timetables, modern open learning can create the collaborative intellectual spaces - virtual and real - that may define the University of the 21st century. Evolutionary changes usually begin on the fringes of ecosystems and current open and distance learning programmes may provide the places, on the margins of the conventional system, where evolutionary change can occur.

Furthermore, because of their commitment to technology, open and distance learning institutions are more likely to make the investments in developing sophisticated uses of technologies - such as gaming - that students will find exciting and engaging. These are the sorts of developments now taking place in the Lifelong Learning Cluster at the University of Mauritius.

All this is speculative, but it may well be that in encouraging the development of open and distance learning you are not only solving the old problems of access, quality and cost, but also creating the type of university that will be congenial to 21st century students. I urge you to reflect on this as you define the mission of the proposed third university of Mauritius. The function and the functioning of an open university need to be different in the 21st century.

The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth

After that speculation, let me come down to earth and talk about a practical example of what technology now makes possible, the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

You are aware that small states make up two-thirds of the 53 countries in membership of the Commonwealth. They include small islands with small populations located in the Caribbean, in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean as well landlocked states with small populations such as Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana - although Botswana is not small geographically. There are also coastal states with small populations such as The Gambia and Belize, which are geographically small, and Guyana and Namibia, which are rather large. Small states have become increasingly conscious of their common needs and are asking international bodies to formulate programmes to address them. But why a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth?

The idea goes back to the triennial meeting of Commonwealth Ministers of Education that was held in

Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in 2000. To understand the genesis of the idea of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth it is important to recall the special context of that Millennium Year: two features in particular.

First, the year 2000 saw a strong focus on development. The largest ever meeting of Heads of Government at the United Nations approved the Millennium Declaration with its eight Millennium Development Goals. That same year the World Forum on Education for All met in Dakar and set six targets for achieving this longstanding but elusive objective.

Second, and in sharp contrast to this concern for improving the lot of the world's poorer people, the rich world got carried away by the dotcom frenzy. The Internet began transforming communication between people and creating new methods of doing business.

Online communication also seemed to have the potential to transform education, so both prophets and vendors did not hesitate to claim that older educational methods would soon be swept into the dustbin of history. Henceforward all true learning would take place in front of the computer screen.

These developments created a charged atmosphere for the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Halifax at the end of 2000. On the one hand the Dakar Goals and the Millennium Declaration had increased the ministers' determination to increase access to education at all levels. But on the other hand new information and communication technology held both the promise of helping to expand education and the threat of making traditional approaches to teaching and learning obsolete.

At that Conference the ministers from the small states shared their anxiety that their countries did not have the critical mass, either of expertise or of equipment, to engage with online learning in an autonomous fashion. They feared becoming tributary, as so often in the past, to the technologies, systems and materials developed by the larger states.

However, they thought that by working together they might be able to nurture an autonomous capacity for online learning that would enable them to harness these new developments for the benefit of their peoples. The mechanism would be a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. They asked COL to flesh out a formal proposal.

COL did so, bringing some of the ministers together for a meeting in Seychelles in 2003. They sent forward a plan for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth that was approved by next Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers, which was held in Edinburgh at the end of that year. The plan was waiting on my desk when I took office as president of COL in 2004 and after reviewing it and making enquiries I reached two conclusions.

First, the atmosphere of urgency - not to say panic - generated by the dotcom frenzy of 2000 now seems ephemeral. When new phenomena appear we often overestimate their short-term impact whilst underestimating their long-term consequences. By 2004 it was clear that online learning was not going to consign previous educational methods to the dustbin of history. Impartial observers are finding many of

the early applications of online learning somewhat disappointing but note, nevertheless, that it is seeping gradually into all forms and levels of education.

Second, the initiative of the Conference of Education Ministers appeared to call for the creation and funding of a new international Commonwealth body, a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth with its own headquarters and organisational structure. My enquiries revealed that the usual donors were not interested in funding any new international structure, although they were keen to facilitate initiatives in education and training that might result from the Virtual University, especially if they were linked to agreed development objectives.

We therefore decided to flip the Virtual University over and build it from the bottom up rather than from the top down. At the end of 2004 I wrote to the Minister of Education of each small state asking three questions. First, do you still want to be part of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth? Second, if so, what are the educational and training objectives that you want to achieve for your country through this mechanism? Third, who is the contact person that you empower to work with COL on this initiative?

About two-thirds of the small states, including Mauritius, said that they wanted to participate and we received some very useful statements of priorities. COL is delighted that Mauritius is part of the network because the involvement of the larger and more technologically sophisticated of the small states, like Mauritius, is very important for this initiative. You have a number of vibrant institutions which could contribute greatly to the network and gain in return.

I emphasise that the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth is an initiative of ministers of education with the aim of assisting the development of education and training - and learning in the widest sense - in small states. This is your project. Our job at COL is to facilitate and guide the process.

What will the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth be?

Nevertheless, let me give you some perspectives from the Commonwealth of Learning about how the project might develop.

First, what form will it take? In the spirit of the 21st century it will be a network rather than an institution - a network with multiple nodes of activity. We are not trying to create a new institution with its own brand name but to find ways to reinforce the institutions and the developments that are already taking place in each country. A common theme of the responses of ministers to my request for their priorities was their ambition of strengthening their existing post-secondary institutions.

The notion of network partially answers my next question - where will the Virtual University be located? It will be located wherever groups of countries and institutions are working together to develop courses or learning materials. COL is content to act as the central node of the network for the time being but we see the real activity taking place in the regions.

How will the Virtual University work? It is a mechanism to help small states work together to produce, share, adapt and use courses and learning materials that would be difficult for one state to produce alone.

What will be the subjects? When we collated the responses from ministers of education we found numerous common topics and programme areas in the submissions from different countries.

These include professional development in the education and health sectors; training related to tourism, small business management and entrepreneurship; skills development for youth and, of course, training in how to do eLearning. We are in the process of creating coalitions to develop materials in the most salient areas of common interest.

What media will be used? COL knows well that the media and ICT environment is still underdeveloped in many small states, especially outside the main towns. We therefore suggested to ministers that the Virtual University would be a multi-media operation, using whatever medium was appropriate for the purpose, whether print, audio, video, DVD and so on. However, it was clear from their replies that most countries see the Virtual University as a special opportunity to develop expertise in online learning or eLearning.

One of the aims of the Virtual University will be to help ministers to fulfil that ambition. In the five years since the ministers of education conceived the idea of the Virtual University, important and helpful developments have occurred in two areas.

First, connectivity is increasing and improving fairly rapidly in all countries. It makes sense to prepare now for a time when connectivity will be much more widespread in small states than it is today. Second, the trend to open educational resources is gaining momentum.

Open educational resources, which refer to open course content, open source software and tools are, in COL's view, a key building block for the Virtual University. You could say that open educational resources are the vehicle that can translate into reality the vision that the ministers had in 2000.

A final point about OERs is that even if, for reasons of connectivity and equipment availability, certain courses are made available to the learners in traditional formats such as print, preparing them by online collaboration between individuals and institutions can greatly speed the processes of development and adaptation.

Another question that I asked earlier was who will take part in the Virtual University. The answer to that is now apparent. Participation will be open to all who are ready to work collaboratively and to share the results of their work.

When will we see results? In the proposal that I made to ministers last year I suggested that the Virtual University would develop in four stages. The first was to identify participants and objectives.

The second, which was the focus of a one-week meeting held in Singapore last September, is to identify common aims and resources. I am confident that as we identify good collaborative projects we can secure financial support for them. The third stage, which comes now, is to develop content and systems.

Finally of course, you will implement elements of the Virtual University with learners. Obviously the timing of that last step will depend on how fast each coalition works. We imagine that the learning materials that emerge from the Virtual University network will be used in countries as and when they are ready. We do not foresee a great ceremonial launch, rather the gradual introduction of new materials and new methods across the small states of the Commonwealth in an organic manner.

That brings me to a final and very important point. So far my remarks have stressed the creation of learning materials. They are indeed the core of the value that we hope to add to existing institutions through the Virtual University.

Let us realise, however, that the successful use of these materials, and their transfer from country to country, will depend crucially on the arrangements that are in place - or can be put in place - for credit transfer, accreditation, the recognition of qualifications from elsewhere, flexibility in residence requirements and so on. Many promising collaborative ventures fall at these hurdles. Part of our task is to remove them from the track. Progress is being made in credit transfer and recognition in all regions of the Commonwealth, but it will need to speed up if the Virtual University network is to fulfil its potential. This is an area where COL is working hand in glove with UNESCO.

It is a crucial element in the success of the Virtual University network, which will fail if it is seen simply as a vehicle for the collaborative preparation of courses and materials. It must be seen as a network that unites and strengthens the institutions in smaller states by enabling them to operate on a larger canvas. That has implications for the way that they work together regionally.

What next for Mauritius?

I said that I would end these remarks with comments about what you should do next in Mauritius. It is time to answer the question in my title: *Open and Distance Learning in Small States: Which Models?*

At the risk of having you think that I am simply trying to flatter you, I must tell you that I shall be telling other small states to look closely at the Mauritius model. What do I mean by that?

First, you have embraced the concepts and practice of distance learning and I am delighted if my 1989 report contributed to today's reality where, for example, a significant proportion of the enrolments at the University of Mauritius are in distance education.

Second, you have learned to collaborate. When I was here in 1989 I sensed a considerable resistance to collaboration between institutions. Turf was guarded jealousy. Indeed, that and later experiences were leading me to formulate Daniel's paradox, which is that inter-institutional collaboration seems to be more

difficult to achieve in small states than in large ones.

But my observations this week have made me revise that view. I see good collaboration between the two universities and I admire that way in which, at the University of Mauritius, the J. Baguant Centre for Professional and Lifelong Learning, the Centre for Information Technologies and Systems and the Virtual Centre for Innovative Learning Technologies have come together within the Lifelong Learning Cluster in a way that is making the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

Third, I am impressed with the actions of the Government of Mauritius. I refer, for example to the articulation of the visions of the Cyber Island and the Knowledge Hub and the steps being taken to implement them. I refer to the consultative way in which the Human Resource Development Plan has been developed and the ongoing reflection on the possible missions and methods of a third university. I also believe that the Government's role in encouraging and creating incentives for the kinds of inter-institutional collaboration that I mentioned earlier is vital.

Fourth, you are open to the future. You have a proposal for an Open University of Mauritius on the drawing board. From what I have heard over the last few days you still have a way to go to develop a clear concept of the purpose and methods of this institution. I hope you will develop that clarity before proceeding. I suggested earlier that you should view the term 'open' in a 21st century rather than a 20th century way. Furthermore I suspect that you need this institution to be skills supermarket rather than a prospectus of degree programmes. Whatever it is, discuss it until you are clear about what you want.

Fifth, all this is leading Mauritius to project itself internationally, most especially in Africa, as a country that is developing successfully and is ready to share its experience and expertise. I am proud that two Canadian institutions that I used to work for, Laurentian University in Ontario and the Télé-université in Québec, helped to set the University of Mauritius on the road to successful distance learning. I am equally delighted that the University of Mauritius and your other institutions are now helping other African countries in the same way. I hope that some of that help will be carried out in the context of the collaborative network that ministers named the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth.

In summary then, I believe that you are finding your way towards a model for open and distance learning that works for Mauritius and is likely to be applicable in other small states. I wish you every success as you take it further.

In the light of what I said earlier about the way that student attitudes are changing, your model for open and distance learning may well transform your institutions in ways that position Mauritius well for the new learning environment of the 21st century.