

Distance Open Learning in the Developing Asian Countries: Problems and Possible Solutions

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Commentary by Mr Ian Mitchell

The identification of this 33pp. monograph as Number 117 is both a reminder of how long this excellent series has been sponsored by the FernUniversität and a further example of the scholarly output its support has generated. The FernUniversität produces the papers in German or English and I recommend you explore the other titles.

When I first read this paper I was delighted with its fresh, frank, open, hard-hitting style. It appealed to me as a scholarly paper, citing acclaimed authors. I was prepared to respond to its provocation, while excusing its occasional lack of specific illustration, because I could understand that the writer could not expose himself to slander charges. (I used 'himself' in the previous sentence, presuming P.R. to be a male; I may be wrong.) I enjoyed having a person from the Asian context critiquing his own environment, rather than having an 'outsider' do it; but more on this point later.

To get a sense of the arguments he explores, see his 'Theses on Distance Education for the Developing World...1. There are greater perils and dangers in blindly copying....2. Indigenous models have greater relevance and strength...3.It is possible to create a variety of models...equally effective, irrespective of success models recommended by 'experienced' distance educators....4.The future..depends more on the ability of institutions to respond to specific learners at different levels and less on their resourcefulness in catching up to their counterparts in the developed world.' (p.9)

But then I went on to a deeper satisfaction from the reading, as I realised that there was also value in critically appraising his assessment of what happens in the 'western' context. He writes somewhat longingly of the western world but I am sure many western academic staff would love to inhabit the world he describes. This world has:

'Adult learners with an appreciable degree of basic/primary/secondary/education

Medium of instruction is mostly through the mother tongue of the learner

Technology and communication facilities

Availability and accessibility of well-equipped, advanced institutions with clear vision and mission statements

Adequate resource mobilization

Thoughtful and committed academic leadership

Flexible and need based curriculum

Committed and/or trained, qualified staff

Thorough planning and implementation of educational programmes

Adequate and efficient student support services

Continuous and systematic monitoring, review and evaluation

Political will (which is crucial) to back up projects and institutions' (p.2f.)

Surprisingly in the above list there is no characteristic, 'flying by the seat of one's pants'. Most Western readers will have operated in the context of this characteristic. (It is a Western colloquialism for 'working frantically against the odds to complete a task - with limited time allowance, few staff and practically no resources - to achieve a successful outcome, whilst hoping no one can see the shortcomings in the final product'.) The author goes on to speak of open universities being reduced in academic status to the level of 'teaching shops or corporate houses' whilst 'governments drastically reduce their funding of open universities, and tell the campus based face to face universities to emulate the examples of open universities to generate their own incomes'. (p.25) This is a familiar scenario in the Western world; (see Glen Postle's article for an elaboration on this concern).

He writes of the paralysing effect of bureaucracy (and, maybe, corruption) in developing country regimes. But, in relation to educational aid money which comes into countries, he shows no awareness of the clumsy, inconsistent, and sometimes politically-tainted efforts of the bureaucrats in donor countries, as they seek to respond to political whims of ministers of state and nominate and mount projects with which they have little first-hand knowledge. While there may be much goodwill and good intent from some people in the midst of this, there is often much inefficiency and lack of 'value for the dollar' from the donor country end.

And this I see as the wide value of the paper - the author probes relentlessly at weakness in developing countries' systems, whilst nevertheless taking time to acknowledge that there are strengths in several aspects of those systems. In the end, he inadvertently demolishes the notion that one can speak of the 'developing countries' - rather, one must speak of each country separately. Conversely, with his range of citations, he illustrates there is a wide range of diversity in philosophy and practice in the 'developed countries', such that each needs to be considered separately, reflecting, in turn, its strengths and weakness.

He questions the nature of the future of campus-based education. He questions whether there is a future for distance education per se. He argues against globalisation, but says its spread is inevitable where lack of expertise, national pride, local enthusiasm, dedication and resources leave, unattended, areas of need. He goes on to add that, quite apart from international pressures, these 'globalisation' pressures are evident even within countries where stronger institutions cannibalise weaker ones..... and one doesn't see that activity confined only to developing countries!

He cites examples to support most of his arguments and readers cannot but be impressed by his breadth of experience. He has brought much of his experience to the FernUniversitat, has extended it there, and now shares it in this paper. I recommend you read it, tussle with its arguments, make the paper 'work' for

you, and apply it in your own context - whether that be in a developing or in a still developing country! It is to be hoped none of us live elsewhere.