

DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND THE FUTURE OF DISTANCE AND OPEN LEARNING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY¹

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Introduction

Let me begin this presentation by expressing my sincere gratitude to our Chief host, Professor Peter Swannell, for the invitation to address this august meeting. Although I was neither too sure of what he specifically wanted me to speak about with regard to distance and open learning in developing countries nor in fact initially prepared to accept the invitation due to a number of reasons, I nevertheless felt that this opportune moment should not be left to pass. There is some indication that the greatest amount of activities in distance and open learning right now and most probably in the future occur in developing countries. This forum and this meeting should therefore have an opportunity to hear the voice (of developing countries) which has for too long lurked in the background but should be in the forefront as the world speaks for and about distance and open learning in contemporary times. The opportunity given me to address you is therefore extremely significant in more ways than one. I would like to mention just three of them.

First, it is becoming almost impossible to mention education and development in developing countries without distance and open learning immediately coming to everyone's lips. It has become, if you like, the anthem of comprehensive national development. One sometimes wonders how the world, especially the developing world, has survived without distance and open education the way we know it today, given the tremendous role it has played in the recent past in all countries of the world. I shall return to this issue later. Second, distance and open education is undergoing phenomenal transformation in all parts of the world. Contemporary developments have shown that distance and open education has now become a household fashion in almost every part of the globe. It is even more significant that the so-called traditional universities which have all along contributed to deriding this innovative and practical form of mass education are now emerging as the major players in its provision even though it will not be out of place to say that their major motivation may not be congruent with the one which the typical open and distance education providers have been associated with. It will not be too long before all universities in the world take their queue in search of their part of the global pie of distance and open education. Third, the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today is also significant because I am next in line to host the ICDE-SCOP meeting in 1999. Hong Kong is looking forward to welcoming all of you and to share with you our experience in what we would like to regard as a successful experiment in using the most cost effective and broad based mode of education to catch the majority of the masses who yearn for education both for personal and national development. It is true to say that but for distance and open learning, the majority of these people would never have had the opportunity of higher education. In this sense distance education is not only a champion of education for all, it has also provided a level playing field for all who wish to participate. In the developing countries therefore, at least as far as the developing countries of Asia are concerned, we can confidently say that we have mastered how to take the distance out of education for anyone who is interested. Indeed as I will mention later, the 'distance' aspect of education has been redefined in Hong Kong.

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Let me hasten to dispel any doubt which may have arisen in your mind regarding the focus of my address. I wish to state that I can not by any stretch of imagination pretend to be speaking for all developing countries. Given the extensive scale of diversities within the developing part of the world, it is unthinkable to expect one single address to capture, albeit in a kaleidoscopic manner, the goings-on in every developing country. However while I will use Hong Kong as my point of reference I should mention that many developing countries, especially within Asia, share our characteristics, concerns, successes, hope and aspirations for the future. In this respect you may be right if you extend the edges of some of my statements as blanket coverage of the state of distance and open learning in the developing countries of Asia.

Taking the distance out of education

Distance and open learning as a form of human resource development has come a long way. It has transcended various chronological landmarks and transformation in nomenclature. When in 1728, Caleb Philipps of Boston , USA decided to teach Short Hand by post, or in 1833 when the study of composition was offered by post in Sweden, or in 1843 when Isaac Pitman began teaching Short Hand through the post in the United Kingdom (see Battenberg, 1971; Holmberg, 1989) little did they or anyone of their time realise the enormous revolution this method of teaching and learning will have on the world.

Known differently and variously as 'correspondence study', 'home study', 'off-campus study', 'independent study', 'distance study', 'telematic teaching', 'extra-mural system', what we now call distance and open learning has meant the same for everyone in the world. This is the provision of education by a mode other than the conventional face to face method but whose goals are similar to, and just as noble and practical, as those of on-campus full-time, face to face education.

The history and evolution of distance education has been marked by three main issues (Gough, 1980). The first is access: to allow students who would otherwise be denied educational opportunities to gain access to courses. The second is equivalence and integrity: students taught at a distance should receive an equivalent education and an equivalent qualification with the same integrity as those earned through the conventional mode. The third is excellence: quest for excellence in quality of learning materials, teaching, support services, academic and administrative systems or professional development of staff. As the resolution of these issues continue to dominate the theory and practice of distance and open learning, many countries in the world, especially those developing, became increasingly attracted to this form of education.

The current situation in Asia

In Asia, like in other regions of the world, the countries are as diverse in many respects just as they are similar in others. Some of the common features include huge and rapidly expanding populations which are still mainly rural, an exceptionally large demand for education which has not been met, the lack of adequate capacity of conventional educational systems to provide access for all, and the inequitable representation of those who have been marginalised through resources, location, economic and other reasons. Let us briefly take a look at the current statistics in Asia.

- Two-thirds of the world population are in Asia (about 3 billion).
- By the year 2000, 800m more bodies will be added to the already teeming population.
- There are 1 billion children under the age of 15 years and up to 400 million under 24 years are out of formal education.
- 500 million adults, over 24 years need education in one form or another in a region characterised by heavy population, incredible migration, and rapid mobility.

From these statistics, the dimensions of Asia's educational challenges are staggering by any standards. One implication of these statistics is that the population is increasing by more than 50 million per year with a very high proportion needing to be educated. To cope with just the primary level of education, the capacity of schools and resources will need to increase by at least 60%. This will need to increase by about 40 percent to cope with the demands for higher education. At the moment we have not even begun to scratch the surface. This has forced almost all the countries within Asia to seek for solution by

experimenting with unconventional modes in order to meet the huge and enormous challenges of mass education for national and individual development. Given the pace with which distance and open learning is still being embraced in Asia it will not be too long before Asia has about a dozen mega universities. Although open education can be said to be a relatively new phenomenon within the Asian region the exponential growth in the number of institutions and students studying by distance education has made Asia the new home of this type of education. Asia now has by far the largest number of students using this mode of education, compared to other regions of the world (Murphy & Yuen, 1997), and as revealed by a recent study of open universities, five of the ten mega-universities (those with over 100,000 enrolments), are in the Asian region (Daniel, 1996). These Open Universities are located in China, India, Indonesia, Korea and Thailand. It will not be out of place to suggest that several of the factors which gave rise to the emergence of the regional economic giants dubbed the Asian Tigers have certainly exerted some impact on the educational sector necessitating the clamour for Higher Education to produce the human resources needed in the labour markets of these newly industrialised economies. In most of the Asian countries therefore, central governments' recognition of the need to use education as a potent force for national and regional development embarked on the establishment of dedicated open learning institutions.

A number of reasons have been suggested to explain why distance learning in higher education has become very topical in national, political and professional circles. First, according to Daniel (1997), the world now has nearly thirty years of experience of the success of a new type of university. Second, learning and teaching, especially through the distance mode has become associated with the tremendous growth of the interactive computer and communications technology. Beginning with print intended purposely for correspondence education, the delivery of education to remote students has gone through the Multi-media model, the Telelearning model and now the emerging fourth generation of distance education, the Flexible Learning Model (see a discussion of the generations of technology by Taylor, 1994). Third, associated with the exponential population growth in the world, is the need to educate and train the mass of people for the 21st century: no guessing, therefore, why Asia has the world largest student enrollment in distance and open learning systems.

The case of Hong Kong is a bit unique within Asia and in the world, as you may all know. There are about 6.5 million people in Hong Kong crowded within a space of less than 1,100 sq.km. This translates to mean 5,900 persons per sq kilometer. Only a quarter of a million people are in Higher Education, while thousands more clamour for it with hardly any more room in conventional educational systems to accommodate them. Yet, we need to provide access to all, as well as provide a quality education to those who have access. Education needs to reach those who are disadvantaged by location, finance, time, and resources. The Open University of Hong Kong which began as the Open Learning Institute in 1989, became self financing in 1993, and a fully fledged university in 1997. We have graduated over 6,000 through our various degree programmes and currently have 24,000 students enrolled in four Schools and Continuing Education Centre. Our students are mainly based in Hong Kong, although we are by a combination of factors, which include natural expansion, and recent reunification with our Motherland, pushing into China. Therefore, it may not be too long before OUHK becomes another mega university in Asia.

One very unique feature of distance and open learning in Hong Kong is that the term 'distance' has been redefined as applied to education due to the nature and geography of Hong Kong. Every part of the Special Administrative Region is accessible within 30 kilometers and one hour of transportation by road, rail or water. Compared with Australia or the United States of America or even New Zealand, our need to take the distance out of education has not been driven largely by sheer need to bridge physical separations. It has been based mainly on providing access as open as possible to those who are always willing to avail themselves of the opportunities education affords them in the quest to continually meet the demands of our ever changing socio-economic environment. The fast pace of business in a world financial capital such as Hong Kong places a lot of demand on its educational system especially to develop in double quick step its human resources. Our university is in the fore front of meeting these daily challenges.

The increasing need for nations to raise the quantity and quality of human resources through higher education will undoubtedly put more pressure on the demand for distance and open education. If the

current global trend of dwindling places for employment and high cost of acquiring education is anything to go by, there is no guessing the fact that we in the business of providing distance and open learning will continue to have a barrage of applicants to wade through. An additional factor that operates mostly in developing countries is the rapidly increasing population. Even at current rate of population growth, no developing country can or has the capacity to provide enough classroom space for all who need education. One can imagine what will be the situation in the next millennium when it is forecast that the world population will hit the 6 billion mark. The global search, especially in developing countries, for a cost effective and efficient way to provide appropriate response to the call to widen access to higher education will further make more demands on distance and open learning. As a result, developing countries in Asia will need re-examine a number of issues in order to meet several challenges and to be fully prepared for the future of education by the distance mode. What are these challenges? Let me spend the remaining time for this presentation in discussing five of the most significant challenges, as I see them.

Redefining Distance education

Traditionally, distance education had initially meant providing a mode of instruction in which learners and their instructors are assisted to overcome the communication barrier of location. Thereafter and due to developments and transformation in education, technology and instructional design, the element of communicating in different or same time frame has come into fore. The use of the term "distance" has therefore moved from technically referring to the barrier of location alone. Contemporary developments and advancement in telecommunication, and computer technology especially, have added the facet of "virtuality" to imply the ability to timeshift as well as overcome geographical distances. Additionally, development within distance education has led to the emergence of other terms such as "distributive learning", "distributed learning", "advanced distributed learning". It would appear therefore that the time has come when the review or at least the comprehensive explication of the term "distance education" be undertaken to extend its borders beyond the inclusion of the timeshift element and geographical distance. In our case in Hong Kong the redefining of distance education in its application has been to look beyond providing education within a community in which everyone lives within about one hour of our campus. There are as many answers as can be imagined but perhaps the most crucial is that most Hong Kong learners, particularly those who wish to undertake their learning through distance education want to be able to timeshift their learning. Several other developing countries I imagine are at this stage of their development one way or another. This makes it imperative for the distance and open education world to review distance education.

Distance Teaching

Closely related to distance education is distance teaching. Many will argue that by implication distance education includes distance teaching. Others might however argue that it has neither been placed at the centre stage of our practice nor has it been examined often enough to engender consensus among practitioners. According to Rowntree (1998), considering technology's potential for outglitzing pedagogy, this is a question urgently in need of debate. He suggests that distance teaching must be seen to constitute something much more than (i) delivering information for learners to learn, (ii) providing an online or other forum where students can share their conceptions and ideas of the subject and (iii) administering tests or assignments that offer students only numerical or letter grades by way of feedback on what they have made of the subject. It appears that many people erroneously mistake distance communication for distance teaching. In any teaching situation, every learner must be made to react or interact within a humanistic and cognitive constructive environment in which "learning" and "learner-centered" is more important than mere communication.

From a cursory observation of what is going on around the globe in distance and open education provision, it would appear that the provision and design of instruction has been upstaged by the use of technology in and of itself as a delivery system with little regard to learning from the perspective of the learner. The use of technology as a medium (and not the message) must address the 'what' and 'how' as the learner responds and integrates the knowledge, attitudes, values and skills that the instructional materials attempt to facilitate their construction. The inclusion of all types of behaviors that facilitate learning and knowledge construction must allow the learner to be critically reflective in a teaching

environment which encourages role-playing, problem-solving and posing, etc. While distance education addresses the issues such as accessibility, affordability, applicability, and accountability, the issue of appropriateness and relevance must be uppermost in our minds.

Relevant distance education and teaching

Talking about relevance brings me to the issue of cultural relevance in distance education. No one questions the universality of the either the theory or practice of distance education. But to pretend that they might mean the same thing and be practiced the same way in developing countries as occur in the developed world may lead to committing what could be regarded as a "type I error" in education. Even within the developing world, situations differ from country to country. In Hong Kong, we have witnessed in the recent past a barrage of wholesale importation of hundreds of offshore distance education programmes some of which could hardly be called distance education let alone having any semblance of quality. Propelled by the urge to make fast money, many of the non-local providers of distance education in Hong Kong are oblivious of the need to consider relevance of their materials to local culture, language and circumstance. There seems to be a second generation colonization of the educational world in which the colonizing organisations completely and wantonly disregard what occurs in and the need of the local environment. They are not only contributing to giving distance and open learning a bad name they are negating or in fact destroying the motivation and objectives of developing countries in embracing the distance mode of education. Even for us at the OUHK, our movement into mainland China has been cautiously guided by our need to tailor our courses to the local situations and needs within China (the same Chinese community) knowing that what obtains in Hong Kong does not necessarily apply to the mainland.

Quality

A lot has been and still being said about quality of and in distance and open learning. I would only add my voice by drawing attention to one or two subsidiary issues in this regard. It is a known secret that distance and open education is largely based on economies of scale. The larger the scale, the wider the door opens, but the more difficult it is to offer a quality educational experience for our learners. When people talk about quality they often mean how equivalent distance education is with traditional education. Distance education and open learning institutions often wrestle with the issue of equivalence status when in fact they have a different mission, different programme orientations, different methods and different students. It is often therefore a wonder why two dissimilar systems struggle for equivalence.

The lack of physical and other resource-based capacities of conventional educational institutions to provide access to all or even to provide a quality education to those who have limited access to their programmes, also often lead to uneducated resistance by many conventional teachers and educational administrators to the unfamiliar terrain of the philosophies and practice of distance and open learning. The most interesting and ironical occurrence to date is that probably with the exception of dual mode institutions, most single mode distance and open learning institutions make extensive use of staff from conventional institutions as tutors, instructional developers, external examiners and reviewers, as part of accreditation teams, etc. So in a way, quality is being assured with the use of those who form the central core of those who determine quality in conventional instructional modes. Perhaps what distance and open education providers in developing countries must begin to embark on, at a bigger and more organised scale, is the comprehensive staff development of this group of "invited" workers from conventional institutions to provide adequate and appropriate orientation to the philosophies and practices central to distance and open education. The systematic development of staff who participate in distance and open education will lend tremendous support to the claim of quality education in distance and open education, and its equivalence with, if not superiority to, conventional education.

Collaborative Networking

In view of the difficulties in keeping pace with development in knowledge explosion, telecommunications, distance and open learning, developing countries would benefit immensely by taking advantage of developments in technology to interact through a collaborative network.

Additional to the issues raised earlier, there is also a number of specific reasons why tertiary institutions offering instruction by the distance mode should network in developing countries, especially of the Asian region should institute a collaborative network. Some of these reasons include the following:

1. Common purpose

All open and distance education institutions have a common purpose of providing quality lifelong education and training appropriate to the rapid economic development taking place in the region and tailored towards the needed flexibility for catering for the huge demand in education and the labour market for constant training for upgrading or converting qualifications.

2. United front

Although the Asian countries have distinguishing cultural, geographic, political and linguistic characteristics which at times could constitute barriers in developing relationships at times, it could equally be argued that the common interests of the institutions which have developed from geographical, political or linguistic alliances (Trindade, 1997) should be pursued through a united front.

3. Globalisation and strategic bonding

Development centered globalization (Dhanarajan, 1997), which addresses issues such as internationalised knowledge systems, the changing patterns of communication, and the penetration of technology into the social, educational and cultural fabric of communities, suggests the need for institutions to form strategic bonding in reviewing and managing the changing face of the global market and educational arena.

4. Complementing similar networks

Open and distance learning institutions in other regions of the world have established and continue to maintain constant professional inter-relationships through national, regional or academic and professional organisations. There are networks such as EDEN (Europe), CAADE (Canada), DEOS (USA) and RESODLAA (Australia). These electronic networks have been found to be a useful way of taking the distance out of learning and teaching. A collaborative network will also serve a complementary role to the ones already available, and also serve a specific regional function.

The collaborative network will provide the open and distance learning institutions in the Asian region to do a lot of things which distance or the lack of face to face meeting prevent. For example, the collaborative network could be used to promote (i) intra and inter-institutional co-operation, (ii) the rapid sharing of information on changes in educational paradigm, (iii) management of distance learning, innovation in pedagogy and technology, etc. as and when available or needed, (iv) the maximisation of the use of scarce resources by sharing across geographical and other borders develop a collegiate environment towards common professional and educational matters within the region, and (v) effectively manage learning in an environment which indicates that the borders between traditional and open universities might soon become blurred with emerging developments in technology and education.

However, the concern that the use of collaborative networking through technology might further marginalise the 'haves' and the 'have nots' within the developing world is real and will need to be tackled. Developments should not further widen the already existing gulf between the emerging economies and the yet to emerge ones within the developing world. Similarly it should not marginalise the developing world in what should be a concerted effort toward a common global development in distance and open education.

It is my hope that the future of distance and open learning in the developing countries will continue to be rosy and be of use to members of the public who need education. Challenges are imminent and would need to be effectively managed for a smooth and positive transition into the next millennium. What must occupy our minds right now is how best to face the challenges and effect the necessary changes.

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