

The Caribbean Universities Project for Integrated Distance Education: Collaborating to overcome the difficulties faced by Small Island Developing States

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Abstract

Human resource development is a primary concern of governments in the Caribbean region, with increased participation in post-secondary education viewed as an important aspect. The Caribbean Universities Project for Integrated Distance Education (CUPIDE) seeks to increase access to tertiary education in the Caribbean region by developing the distance education capacity in each of five universities: The University of the West Indies, the University of Technology, Jamaica, the University of Guyana, the University of Suriname, and the University Quisqueya (Haiti).

The development objective of the CUPIDE project is to develop the human resources within the region through enabling each of the five participating universities to develop and deliver quality distance education programmes using information and communication technology. In this way, the competitiveness of the region in general and the institutions in particular will be enhanced, participation in the knowledge society increased – not only as users, but also as generators of knowledge – and cost savings realised in the use of the technology for distribution of the course materials and the teaching and administration of programmes. Clearly, collaboration among the participating institutions is a key to the success of this project which re-defines and bridges linguistic, political and cultural boundaries in higher education.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE CARIBBEAN

The Caribbean region comprises a number of islands in, and mainland countries which border on, the Caribbean Sea. Described as small, developing countries, they share a history of colonisation by the English, French, Spanish and Dutch (some countries still remain colonies) resulting in varying language and culture groupings in the region today. Human resource development is a primary concern of governments in the Caribbean, with increased participation in post-secondary education viewed as an important aspect. Because of the relatively small population distributed across mainly small islands, distance education is seen as an important means of providing cost-effective access.

The globalisation of knowledge and educational products and services means that all countries can, in principle, be both providers and consumers. The Caribbean region has traditionally been a consumer of distance education rather than a provider. Watson and Marrett (1999) and Koul (2002) describe past, current and planned distance education offerings by indigenous institutions in the Anglophone Caribbean. Marrett (2005) identifies some 15 institutions in the Commonwealth Caribbean as being involved in or indicating an interest in becoming involved in distance education.

However, although there is increasing recognition of the advantages of offering programmes through distance education, Morgan (2000, p.107) points out that "there is still the propensity to treat this mode as the despised poor relation of face-to-face teaching". Perraton (1983) makes the more general point that the success or failure of a distance education project will depend at least as much on its political context as on its methods. Organizational culture can also affect the success or failure of a distance education project. It has also been suggested that because "educational transactions tended to be closed ones and distance education threatened to make them far more open" educators might feel threatened and hence resist adopting distance education (UWIDEC, 2000, p.6).

Apart from these cultural challenges, there are also economic and resource related issues. The small state

economies of the Caribbean present challenges of access to economies of scale, therefore "the creation and delivery of distance material constitute a substantial investment, which is difficult to quantify and equally difficult to recoup" (Morgan, 2000, p.107). Through greater production capacity, powerful alliances and high volume markets than that of small, developing countries like those of the Caribbean, developed countries (and to some extent, larger developing countries) will likely become the major producers of distance education products and services. By using division of labour (some people developing learning materials, others supporting students, others providing logistic support, etc.) and the specialisation that this permits, the 'mega-universities' (Daniel, 1996) have been able to develop a model of supported open learning which can operate flexibly at large scale, with low costs and high quality (Daniel, 1999). This can pose an economic, political and cultural threat to small developing countries and small states (UWIDEC, 2000, p.6). There are those who fear that globalised open and distance education will amount to cultural importation/invasion/imperialism (Evans, 1995, pp.314-315).

In order to address the challenge of the development and delivery of distance education in the small states of the region, collaboration is often recommended as one solution (Koul 2002; Bates, 2001; Thurab-Nkhosi, 2000; Marrett and Harvey, 1998).

CHANGING THE DYNAMICS WITH ICT

Information and communication technology (ICT) makes possible new learning environments in which learners, tutors and learning resources can all be networked. These same ICT possibilities also permit new working environments for those responsible for the facilitation of learning. Thus lecturers can use the Internet for synchronous and asynchronous communication with colleagues, video-conferencing for meetings, digital libraries for research, etc. The interaction of these new technologies with the people creates a teaching environment in which lecturers, tutors, students and teaching resources can all be networked (Marshall & Gregor, 2002).

Using ICT in the global learning environment requires both staff and students to cross new socio-cultural borders (Jegade, 2000) and acquire new literacies and learning skills (Wallace and Yell, 1997). But to achieve maximum advantage from the use of ICT, it is also necessary to re-engineer work practices (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999). Traditionally, tertiary institutions have carried out all the functions relating to the provision of tertiary education: content production; packaging content; credentialing programs; presentation to students; marketing; registration, payment and record keeping; and, assessment. In the online world, these functions can more readily be disaggregated and each institution can specialize in those functions that it regards as its 'core business', forming alliances for other functions or outsourcing to new intermediaries in the value chain (Gregor, et al, 2002). The new ICTs facilitate the required changes in inter-organizational relationships. The advantage of these alliances to smaller institutions is the opportunity to improve the quality of the educational experience through the aggregation of expertise from different sources.

But the ICT facilitated changes in the learning, working and organizational environments just described are themselves likely to be yet another disadvantage for small island states. Up to this time the culture of ICT remains young, middle-class, male and western based (e.g., Holderness, 1998) and "without innovative ICT policies, many people in developing countries - especially the poor - will be left behind" (UNDP Barbados, 2003). Adoption of the Internet in the Caribbean significantly lags that in the United States and other developed countries. But Internet adoption is also uneven within the Caribbean region, for example, in 2003 approximately thirty-seven (37) percent of the inhabitants of Barbados were Internet users compared to six (6) percent for St Vincent and the Grenadines, and one (1) percent for Haiti and Cuba (ITU, 2004).

Many governments and global agencies have recognised the growing issues associated with inequitable ICT access and have provided funded programs aimed at addressing specific needs within nation states. However, experience in developed countries is showing that many of the high-cost IT infrastructure programs are failing to meet their stated aims in equity of end-use and that there is a glass ceiling in the adoption of ICT for either local community benefit or society at large (Gurstein, 2003). Indeed, there is growing evidence that community based disadvantages resulting from uneven societal adoption of ICT are growing (Castells, 2001).

There is now increased understanding that the provision of ICT access, either high or low capacity, through government and private sector efforts by itself is insufficient to address these issues.

THE CARIBBEAN UNIVERSITIES PROJECT FOR INTEGRATED DISTANCE EDUCATION

The Caribbean Universities Project for Integrated Distance Education (CUPIDE) seeks to increase access to tertiary education in the Caribbean region by developing the distance education capacity in each of five universities: The University of the West Indies, the University of Technology, Jamaica, the University of Guyana, The University of the West Indies (UWI), the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech), the University of Guyana (UG), the Anton de Kom University of Suriname (AdeKUS), and the University Quisqueya (UniQ), located in Haiti.

The development objective of the CUPIDE project is to develop the human resources within the region through enabling each of the five participating universities to develop and deliver quality distance education programmes using ICT to create learning environments in which learners, tutors and learning resources can all be networked. Because of the low and uneven access to, and adoption of the Internet in the Caribbean and the inability to access the economies of scale that make the creation and delivery of distance material economically viable, it is important for the universities in the project to collaborate in:

- Creating and sourcing of content;
- Developing the technological infrastructure required by the educational providers;
- Distributing and delivering the content;
- Developing the technological infrastructure required by the students.

In this way, the competitiveness of the region in general and the institutions in particular will be enhanced, participation in the knowledge society increased – not only as users, but also as generators of knowledge – and cost savings realised in the use of the technology for distribution of the course materials and the teaching and administration of programmes.

The specific objectives of the CUPIDE project are to:

1. Develop an expandable framework to accommodate a multiplicity of technologies, known and unknown;
2. Select appropriate enabling technologies and media;
3. Acquire appropriate hardware and software for the telecommunication network, materials distribution and reproduction, teaching and administration;
4. Identify programmes to be developed for delivery using ICTs and to develop them;
5. Identify and provide in the initial stage and where necessary technical assistance in the development of the technical, administrative, and educational systems based on the use of ICTs;
6. Identify appropriate personnel (academic, administrative, technical) in each institution to be trained in ICTs for teaching, administration, and materials delivery, thereby building the human resource capacity in the provider institutions;
7. Train the persons who have to use the technology including students;
8. Identify the requisite recurrent budgetary support;
9. Establish with the support of CARICOM and other such bodies strategic linkages with providers and manufacturers;
10. Establish/strengthen links between universities;
11. Gather baseline data (including existing studies) on matters such as technology in the region; use of ICTs by the universities in the region for distance education; other initiatives in the region;
12. Develop projections of prospects for expansion to other institutions at different levels of the educational system.

With completion of the project scheduled for December 2006, CUPIDE is yet to be formally evaluated. What follows are some observations and views of the Project Operations Manager, who has been involved with the project from conception to the present (the last quarter of implementation).

Collaboration among tertiary level institutions in the region is often instigated from outside:

CUPIDE started out as a project idea submitted in September 2000 to the Embassy of Japan in Jamaica by UWIDEC on the invitation of the then research officer of the Embassy of Japan in Jamaica. The initial idea was for development of UWIDEC's capacity for Web-based activities for distance education, including course development and delivery, and the use of the Web for distribution of materials. The project idea was supported. However the donors recommended that the proposal be broadened to include other institutions in the region. Whether the impetus to continue to collaborate after the external influence is withdrawn remains to be seen.

Developing a collaborative project can be more time consuming than “going it alone”, over and above bureaucratic delays for approval:

In order to further develop the project in light of the expanded beneficiaries, a UWI/UNESCO project formulation mission to Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago was undertaken in February 2001. The mission benefited from input of two consultants from Japan, and representatives of CARICOM, the University of Guyana, the Anton de Kom University of Suriname, the University Quisqueya, and the University of Technology. Meetings were held with a broad cross section of administrative, technical and academic staff, representatives of the non-campus countries and the Cave Hill Campus (via teleconference), and representatives Ministries and other organizations involved in education.

Arising from the meetings in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, a project was submitted to UNESCO in April 2001. Based on feedback from the donors and UNESCO, the proposal was amended and resubmitted in September 2001. The project agreement between UWI and UNESCO was signed in January 2003.

The coordinating role of a neutral body in a multi-institution collaboration is key:

CARICOM is the chair of the project advisory committee on which representatives of each of the participating institutions sit. The representatives to the Project Advisory Committee (PAC) were nominated by the leadership of each institution. Although the project is managed by UWI, the monitoring role of the project advisory committee ensures equitable input in decision making and division of the proceeds from the project.

Institutional commitment to collaboration and stability in management ensures continuity:

As the universities' involvement in CUPIDE is at the institutional level rather than departmental or on the individual level, the project has been able to withstand changes in the major players. From inception to the present, UTech and UniQ have each had three representatives to the PAC, and the University of Guyana and AdeKUS two each. However the changes have not negatively impacted the project and this may be attributed to: (i) the institutional commitment to the project ensures a smooth transition from one representative to the next, and (ii) the chair of the PAC and the Project Manager have remained unchanged, although the Director of the UWI Distance Education Centre, (the department responsible for the management and implementation of the project in UWI) has changed.

Institutional commitment may slow down the decision making process:

As one PAC representative wrote in an email explaining the slow response to a particular request, “Within our organization we use a ‘democratic’ system which involves all beneficiaries, like the faculties and institutes of the university) to contribute to the decision-making. Although this is not necessarily a bad thing, it can really slow down the process, as we have experienced”. (email correspondence of September 7, 2006).

Communication is important to successful collaboration:

It is fair to say that CUPIDE would not be able to function without each university having access to electronic mail, which is the main medium of communication. Also the ability to have electronic meetings by

teleconference also facilitates PAC meetings, held on a quarterly basis.

Different levels of infrastructure and staffing challenge the project:

Although there have been obvious improvements in access to Internet services in all the institutions since the inception of the project, there remains differences in speed and reliability of the infrastructure across the institutions. One objective of this project is in fact to help to even the access. Likewise, differences in the level of staffing impact the rate of response from the institutions, when obligations for project activities compete with other commitments to work in the university on the part of the high level PAC representatives. To understand the differences eases the potential frustration.

Differing levels of development in distance education present challenges for the collaborators:

UWI is the most advanced of the five institutions in development and delivery of distance education courses. UWI also has a larger constituency than the other institutions. It has been a challenge to ensure equity in the distribution of the project resources. However, the PAC meetings and exchange of email have been useful in arriving at consensus. UWI does take a leadership role not only in the management of the project but also in providing advice to partner institutions.

Language

The language of the project is English. However, the official language of Suriname is Dutch, and Haiti is French. Although the PAC representatives are well versed in English, as are most of the senior administrative and academic staff of two of the institutions, access to primary documents from the countries for English-speaking consultants, or locating consultants versed in the language of the countries has presented challenges. Recourse to translation and interpreters is a necessary call on the budget. It also slows down implementation. Indeed, communication across language groupings within the Caribbean remains a challenge not only for CUPIDE but for the region as a whole.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Clearly, collaboration among the participating institutions is a key to the success of the CUPIDE project, which re-defines and bridges linguistic, political and cultural boundaries in higher education.

Generalising from this specific project, it is clear that in order to overcome the resource challenged environments of small island developing states, collaboration is needed:

- With organizations to provide the technological infrastructure for reasonably priced access to the bandwidth required;
- With individuals and organizations to use/develop Open Source software for the required technical systems;
- Through projects such as CUPIDE to provide the staff development and capacity building required in the educational institutions;
- With funding/support bodies to obtain infrastructure for additional access points;
- With NGOs and government departments to create and maintain access points as cross-sectoral “knowledge centres”;
- With communities in the region to create socio-cultural learning environments in the “knowledge centres”;
- With individuals and organizations to develop and share course materials, learning objects, and other content resources (e.g., through CUPIDE, COL Virtual University for Small States);
- With organizations to support, market and deliver education within and outside the region more effectively, and to diversify income sources;
- With tertiary educational institutions and academics around the world to conduct and publish research on using DE and ICT in the provision of higher education in difficult circumstances.

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