

Distance education and collaboration in the Caribbean

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Ladies and gentlemen

Our thanks to the CARIMAC and partner WINDS-Caribe for organising this workshop, which in addition to familiarising participants with the Seventh Framework Programme for research and technological development provides the opportunity for our institutions to share information and ideas. I know that the UWI Open Campus is pleased to have been given the opportunity to give the presentation on our establishment and work and to mount the display.

In my presentation I will give a brief overview of distance education, distance education in the Caribbean, the use of ICTs in distance education at the tertiary level, and collaboration in distance education. I will end with ideas for developing proposals for ICT research and development in the Caribbean, especially as it pertains to distance education.

The Caribbean context

The countries that comprise the Caribbean are separated by wide expanses of sea, and in some cases, relatively large land masses. They are also separated by language and social and political systems inherited from the history of colonization by different European powers. So in fact, determining what is meant by “Caribbean” is not a straight forward matter. Finding statistics on “the Caribbean” therefore is sometimes challenging, as the Caribbean is often grouped with Latin America, itself not having a straight forward definition. Suffice it to say that the population of the countries of the Caribbean (including Guyana in South America and Belize in Central America), with the exception of our non-English-speaking neighbours of Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Puerto Rico, is small. Only Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago number over one million.

Distance Education

The Commonwealth of Learning defines distance education as:

the delivery of learning or training to those who are separated mostly by time and space from those who are teaching or training. The teaching is done with a variety of "mediating processes" used to transmit content, to provide tuition and to conduct assessment or measure outcomes. (<http://www.col.org/resources/Pages/default.aspx>)

Distance education has its origins in correspondence education with beginnings in around the 1800s. Professor Badri Koul, a former director of the UWI Distance Education Centre that is now incorporated into the UWI Open Campus, summarised correspondence education as being based on the medium of print, the technology of the postal system, and an orientation to information transfer for the purpose of preparing students for public exams (Koul, cited in Marrett 2006, p.30). According to Koul, following World War II and beyond, not only have various media (print, audio, video, computer) and communication technologies (print, telephone, audio-visual broadcasts, cassettes, Internet, etc.) been incorporated, but the orientation and purpose have been impacted by research and application of its findings in teaching and learning. So distance education in whatever form should not only have an orientation to information transfer, but should seek to engage the learner in the learning process, applying the principles of pedagogy - teaching children - and andragogy - helping adults learn (Koul cited in Marrett 2006, p. 31). The purposes served by distance education are not only for preparation for public exams, but also to

contribute to the democratisation of education, life-long learning, updating knowledge and skills, in-service training, etc.

With the increased use of ICTs within the classroom setting, the lines between distance education and traditional face-to-face education are blurring. Some distance education offerings incorporate face-to-face delivery, while materials in the various formats prepared for distance students are used in the classroom setting.

Distance Education in the Caribbean

Many persons in the Caribbean historically have been and currently are beneficiaries of distance education provided by institutions outside of the region. The provision of distance education by institutions within the Caribbean is relatively recent.

Watson and Marrett (1999) identify early offerings by institutions in the Anglophone Caribbean as occurring in the 1970s and being mainly projects targeting teachers, such as the Emergency Science Programme, The Ministry of Education, Guyana (1977); In-service Teacher Education Thrust (ISTET), Jamaica, (1973-1982); Comprehensive Teacher Training Project (CTTP), Windward Islands, (1988-1993); and Educational Broadcasting Service, (EBS), Jamaica, (1972-1981).

However, allow me to share the story of Mr. Arthur Williams (Senior), a Jamaican individual (rather than an institution), who was honoured by the Jamaican Association for Distance and Open Learning (JADOL) in November 2003, for his pioneering work in distance education in Jamaica. In the late 1950s for a period of three years, on his own initiative and with his own finances and with the support of his wife (they were both teachers), he developed and offered correspondence courses island-wide for the eight courses in the Third Jamaica Local Examination. In describing his experience he spoke of spending “many nights at the typewriter. With the use of carbon paper I did five copies of typed work at a time. So to produce a hundred copies, I had to type each page twenty times.” He observed that “Today, we have at our disposal photocopiers, fax machines, computers and e-mail and closed circuit television, amongst other teaching aids. Distance teaching is so much easier these days.”

Today, the number of Caribbean institutions offering their own programmes by distance is small but growing covering a variety of disciplines. Marrett (2006) identifies some 15 institutions in the Commonwealth Caribbean that offer or are developing capabilities to offer their courses or programmes by distance. Additionally, Watson and Marrett (1999) identify the University of the Virgin Islands, and a few institutions in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba as providing their own distance education courses or programmes. They could not identify any locally produced distance education programmes out of the Francophone or Dutch Caribbean.

Distance education “has a weighting towards sometimes quite high fixed costs in start-up but which allow for economies of scale as student numbers increase” (SAIDE 2004: 2) with average per student costs declining at thresholds of 500, 1,000 and 10,000 students (p. 8). Given that the population of the individual countries is small in number and that, apart from UWI, most tertiary institutions were established with national rather than regional focus, the slow although increasing pace of the adoption of distance education delivery of their own programmes by the Caribbean institutions is not surprising. In practice if not yet as policy, some of these national institutions, such as the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech) are catering to regional audiences and are developing their distance education capabilities. Some, like UTech and The Mico have used distance education for upgrading staff. In many ways, the development of

distance education in Caribbean institutions remains project based rather than being institutionalised.

ICTs in distance education at the tertiary level in the Caribbean

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) incorporate a variety of information technologies but for the purposes of this presentation I am using it to refer largely to those used for on-line or e-learning. In 2004, institutions in the Caribbean that were identified as incorporating some form of on-line teaching in their own programmes were UWI, the Vocational Training and Development Institute (VTDI) and the Management Institute for National Development (MIND) in Jamaica.

I wish to emphasise the distance education element. There are some recent studies that look at ICTs in education, with the emphasis on site-based use of ICTs. One such is the 2008, *infoDev/World Bank Survey of ICT and education in the Caribbean* by Edmond Gaible. This study focuses on the use of ICT mainly in primary and secondary education, with some discussion of its use in tertiary, vocational, and non-formal education. While it finds that at the tertiary level in the Caribbean, “student access to computer and the Internet at many tertiary level institutions (TLIs) is adequate... access to ICT and ICT-focused education at teachers colleges and other teacher-education institutions is significantly lower than in other TLIs” (Gaible 2008, p. xviii). This must present a major challenge to the education system in the Caribbean, if the institutions training the teachers to go out into the schools to teach with and teach about the technology are behind in provision. The study also found that “establishment of region-wide ICT infrastructure supporting increased collaboration and wider use of ICT-supported distance education remains a challenge region-wide” (*Ibid*, xviii).

In 2002, in addition to finding that the infrastructure in the region was inadequate to support virtual education, in his examination of the evolution, status and future prospects of higher virtual education in 17 English-speaking Caribbean countries and Suriname, Koul also concluded that the human resources [faculty, technical staff in materials production, web-design, etc.] that were needed to properly introduce higher virtual education was generally not adequate at that point in time. Other major barriers identified were the costs of connectivity and a low level of computer literacy. He referred also to limited legal provision and inadequate policies to govern higher virtual education in the region. In spite of strides made through CARICOM and the OECS and deliberate thrusts towards policy formulation that Koul recognised, the progress since 2002 is slow.

The Internet World Stats (IWS - www.internetworldstats.com) defines the Internet penetration rate as “the percentage of the total population of a given country or region that uses the Internet” and an Internet user as “anyone [regardless of age] currently in capacity to use the Internet”. IWS considers Internet users as persons who have “available access to an Internet connection point” and who have “the basic knowledge required to use web technology”. With these definitions, four Caribbean countries fall within IWS’s top 47 countries with the highest penetration rate, that is over 50 percent of the population using the Internet. These are Antigua and Barbuda in 4th place with a penetration rate of 85.9%, behind Greenland, Netherlands and Norway, Barbados at number 27, with a penetration rate of 63.8%, St. Lucia at number 28, with a penetration rate of 63.6%, and Jamaica at number 42, with a penetration rate of 53.5% (based on March 2008 information).

However, for the purpose of tertiary studies, the location of the Internet connection point and its effect on progress may be a matter for closer investigation. For example, in 2007 a survey of students (teachers in Jamaica) registered in an on-line programme at UWI highlighted that 59% of

the students in one particular cohort of did not have Internet access at home, which negatively impacted the frequency with which they came on-line. According to Dunn, in the Jamaica country report of the Global Information Society Watch, 2008, in Jamaica regarding

household broadband penetration across all socio-economic groupings, levels are dismally low at approximately 13% (Budde, 2007). As fixed lines are the primary means for household internet connectivity, a fixed-line teledensity of 14.3% (Budde, 2007) foreshadows the relatively low internet uptake. While there is potential for expanding access via mobile broadband, and through new fixed-line provider Flow, effective access will remain elusive without adequate policy provisions and resourcing. Slow uptake of the internet could also be attributed to the fact that most Jamaicans are lacking affordable hardware for internet connectivity, with a national stock of only 6.7 computer units per 100 persons in 2006 (World Bank, 2006). This contrasts with almost universal mobile penetration, and a high number of television sets, which stood at 70% of Jamaican households in 2006 (World Bank, 2006). [Dunn, 2008]

These are considerations that Caribbean institutions incorporating ICT based distance education programmes aimed at students within the Caribbean need to factor into development. If the programmes are targeting students overseas, the considerations may be different, depending on the targeted countries.

Collaboration in distance education in the Caribbean

In a 2006 study of institutional collaboration in distance education at the tertiary level in the Caribbean to establish the extent to which such collaboration enhanced human resource development, Marrett found that of 38 cases occurring between 1982 and 2002, although there was a dramatic increase in such collaborative initiatives in the first three years of this decade, there was limited collaboration among Caribbean institutions. Academic programming occurred mainly through the delivery of the programmes of overseas institutions through local institutions. Although these arrangements did contribute to the satisfaction of the demand for tertiary education, they did not contribute in any large measure to the capability of the local institutions to develop and deliver distance education programmes. Collaboration among Caribbean institutions was largely in the area of training. It was found that second to personal contact, ICTs enabled the development of the collaborative initiatives. On the other hand, in four of 29 cases for which information was provided, uneven provision of technology was also cited as limiting the collaboration.

The study further highlighted the need for written, carefully worded agreements between or among collaborating institutions was highlighted to ensure institutional sustainability when there are changes in primary participants in such initiatives.

One initiative that occurred outside the period covered in that research was the UWI-UNESCO Caribbean Universities Project for Integrated Distance Education (CUPIDE). Funded through the Japanese Funds in Trust for Capacity-building, it involved five universities in the region, Anton de Kom University of Surinam, University Quisqueya in Haiti, University of Guyana, University of Technology, Jamaica, and UWI. Implemented between 2003 and 2007, CUPIDE's main objective was to increase access to tertiary education through the development of distance education capacity of the participating universities.

Although the project met its goals to some extent, challenges faced included the varying capacities across the institutions, different levels of technical infrastructure, both nationally and institutionally, and varying human resource capacities which slowed response time and agreement on priorities. The language divide was only overcome by the autocratic use of English as the

language of the project. Happily, colleagues in Suriname and Haiti had an enviable command of the English language.

An earlier project across the language divide, the Caribbean University Level Project, between UWI and institutions in the Dominican Republic highlighted the challenge posed by different educational systems in the language groupings. This is also an issue in collaboration in joint programme development and or delivery even across institutions in the English speaking countries.

CARICOM's Caribbean Knowledge and Learning Network, which started in 2004, has support from the World Bank, EU, UNDP, UNESCO, ICA, CIDA and OAS. It's mission is to enhance regional competitiveness through the facilitation of networking, knowledge-sharing and instruction at the tertiary level. It has carried out assessments of infrastructure and ICT competencies of some nine tertiary level institutions and mounted course development workshops, CKLN is proposing to implement CaribNet, an advanced high-speed network to connect the region's tertiary learning institutions. I heard earlier that the time projection for this is three years.

Ideas for proposals for ICT research and development in distance education in the Caribbean

Internet usage and on-line learning will increase in the Caribbean. Whether the Caribbean institutions will become greater contributors to the global offering of distance education programmes on-line (rather than being only recipients) will depend on their foresight in the development and implementation of policies that embrace distance education and foster collaboration.

Some questions and issues to be incorporated into research proposals for ICTs and distance education in the Caribbean include:

What is the demand for programmes developed within the Caribbean by audiences outside of the region? What currency does a qualification from a Caribbean institution have in the international arena? Are there possibilities for courses developed by our institutions being incorporated into programmes of overseas institutions? What are the copyright and royalty implications for the developers of the course and the institution?

The quality of the programmes now being produced and cost considerations need also to be investigated. Economic studies of potential earnings from the export of educational programmes from the Caribbean to the wider world as well as the quantification of expenditure on the importation of tertiary education into the region are further areas for research.

Given the technology challenges identified earlier, how are Caribbean students adapting and coping with on-line learning? How are faculty of institutions adapting, balancing work between face-to-face and on-line instruction? Are there differences across institutions?

How can mobile telephone technologies be incorporated into distance education in the Caribbean?

Although I will not be here tomorrow due to previously scheduled travel duty, I look forward to the output of this workshop. Thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts with you.

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