

Papers - Day 2

Developing a National Distance Learning System: A Trinidad and Tobago Perspective

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Abstract

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago recognizes that education and training are pivotal to sustainable development, and that the need to increase participation ratios in tertiary level education is critical. This powerful indicator has been a major influence on the public policy initiative to launch a National Distance Learning System in December 1998. Prior to that action, introductory educational and enrichment programmes were being aired, and several nationals pursued credit and non-credit programmes from higher education institutions at home and abroad. The launch of a Distance Learning System marked a concerted policy succession thrust to promote and pursue the concept of lifelong learning and so increase and enrich the level of human resource development using, especially, existing and emerging information and communication technologies.

This paper examines the unique initiatives of the Ministry of Training and Distance Learning to date, as the Ministry establishes a National Distance Learning System that promotes the concept of inclusion, that provides for equality of opportunities, and that promises to transform the country into a learning society.

Introduction

The Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago acknowledges its obligation to prepare its citizens to prosper in an information economy. In recognition of the importance of economic diversification for the survival of Trinidad and Tobago, education and training continue to be regarded as being of paramount importance to national development. A highly skilled human resource component is

determined as imperative for development in this technology-dependent era. Distance education has been deemed both a distinct alternative and a logical complement to traditional education and training methods.

In pursuit of its mandate, the Ministry of Training and Distance Education is actively promoting the establishment of a National Distance Learning System that will position

Trinidad and Tobago as the regional leader in the development and delivery of distance education programmes and related services. Such a system will:

- Provide citizens with cost-effective equitable access to a range of training, information and educational services;
- Afford priority focus to residents of more geographically and socially isolated communities;
- Support traditional methods of delivery by incorporating distance learning modalities;
- Provide the technological framework and promote the market for education and training applications in distance learning;
- Establish a network that might be used to initiate teachers, trainers as well as residents in a lifelong learning stream; and
- Facilitate national development.

“The official launch of NDLS took place in December 1998, marking the formal commencement of a concerted thrust to widen access to educational and training opportunities. A significant element in the diagnostic and formative evaluation that immediately followed the launch was the formulation of a comprehensive plan titled ‘An Overview of Issues and Concerns in Establishing a National Distance Learning System (NDLS), and Enabling Action Plan 1998-2001’. A Distance Learning Secretariat was also established with responsibility for the administration and implementation of the Distance Learning Programme.”

Several key issues have been addressed as the country embarks upon a system that is national in scope, that already exists in various stages of development and is being independently

‘managed’ by several disparate organizations and individuals. Among these are research and development, the identification of support systems, programme development, acquisition and delivery, the establishment of parameters for the provision of courses and programmes to the national community.

This paper will attempt to review the country’s efforts at addressing these issues by examining the government’s strategic intention and objectives, its initiatives to date and its short- and medium-term goals in establishing a sustainable National Distance Learning System. Since such a system was launched in December 1998, several key activities have taken place.

Research and Development

The commissioning of a needs assessment of the secondary level and further education leavers and also of the non-school adult population was an early diagnostic initiative. The result of this survey is now being used to inform distance learning policy.

Preliminary analysis of the survey data indicates a preference for television and print as the main delivery modes, closely followed by video cassette, radio and the Internet. With respect to access to audio-visual equipment, 97 percent of the respondents had access to radio and television, 14 percent to computers, and 8 percent to e-mail and the Internet.

Programme Development, Acquisition and Delivery

- The development and delivery of a vocational skills training programme targeted to “host home operators”, formerly called bed and breakfast operators, was another early initiative. This training programme was delivered using print, radio,

television and face-to-face tutorials as the delivery modalities. This experience at programme development and delivery vividly demonstrated the need for a team approach and an abundance of financial resources for such a venture.

- Other non-credit enrichment programmes are being developed to meet expressed needs of citizens. The secondary school survey indicated a need for assistance with Mathematics, Spanish and Principles of Accounts. Programmes in these areas were developed and delivered via television.
- Delivery of enrichment programmes to the national community utilizing broadcast radio and television was facilitated by agreement with international educational institutions. Ryerson Polytechnic University in collaboration with CJRT-FM Radio provided a series of programmes that are being broadcast over national radio. These include topics such as: Entrepreneurship; Gerontology - Aging and You; Organizational Behaviour; Economics; Psychology: The Study of Human Behaviour; Sociology: Understanding Sociology; and Nutrition and Society.

Eleven community based distance learning centres were established as a critical partnership endeavour. Computer literacy courses are being offered at these centres as a prelude to the introduction of advanced training utilizing a range of distant modalities. Community residents are also able to access a range of enrichment programmes provided on video and through the broadcast media - radio and television.

Graduates of the computer literacy programme access online training courses in such areas as SAT Preparation, A+ Certification, Networking Essentials, Mathematics and Grammar Skills.

This is another attempt at preparing nationals to embark on distance learning programmes for credit.

The Distance Learning Secretariat continues to explore other partnership agreements with internationally credible distance learning programme providers, with a view to establishing provider partnerships for local delivery of programmes that are culturally relevant.

Partnerships

The Distance Learning Secretariat recognizes the importance of forging partnerships with local, regional and international stakeholders (both public and private sector) for project funding and implementation. This will afford nationals the opportunity to participate in national skills and educational upgrading. The following partnership initiatives have been explored:

Local Partnerships

- Local community organizations, to establish community based distance learning centres.
- Shell Trinidad Limited and Computers and Controls Limited, with respect to programme delivery and acquisition.
- B.P. Amoco, in the establishment and operation of a rural community based distance learning centre.
- The Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT), for the provision of initial Internet facilities at the community based distance learning centres.

Recognizing the need for a national information highway that utilizes a broadband network, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago effected a Memorandum of Understanding with a

nationally registered company to finance the construction and operation of a nationwide digital wireless network to assist in the establishment of twenty-five virtual classrooms in the country. The government will be afforded free access to the network to provide distance learning content and transmission.

Regional Partnerships

The Inaugural meeting of the Education Satellite (EDSAT) Americas Technical Team was co-hosted by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in Port of Spain, on April 22 and 23, 1999. This team was established to formulate a proposal for a largely satellite-based distance education system and common infrastructure to link education and health care institutions across the countries of the hemisphere. A standing committee continues to monitor implementation of the results of the initiative.

International Partnerships

- The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) funded a visit to distance education institutions in Canada for the acquisition of quality information useful in the development of strategies to advance distance learning in Trinidad and Tobago.
- The Distance Learning Secretariat, in collaboration with the University of the West Indies Institute of Business and Design For Learning International, a British organization, co-hosted a conference, "Distance Learning: A Caribbean Perspective". The overall objective was to demonstrate distance learning methodology, support systems and materials and to involve national stakeholders in the development of action plans for implementing the system.

- The Ministry of Training and Distance Learning continues its quest to forge partnerships with international organizations such as the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization of American States (OAS).

Support Systems

A number of agencies have been identified to support a system that is national in scope as it discharges its mandate, including the following:

- The National Library and Information System Authority. The Ministry of Training and Distance Learning held a sensitization session for librarians at the launch of the National Distance Learning System. NALIS is also involved in planning sessions at the ministry. Electronic databases library services are available through the library services.
- The National Training Agency has a role in the accreditation of programmes.
- The National Broadcasting Network, which provides programme delivery via the radio and television.
- The National Information Systems Centre, which provides training, maintenance and support for the computer literacy programmes.
- The Government Printery - a valuable support for materials production.
- The Trinidad and Tobago National Distance Learning Association, which is due to be launched in September and also provides a forum for distance learning professionals to inform the direction of the national system.

- Proposals are currently being developed for the establishment of a Teaching and Learning Technologies Laboratory and a Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning.

Policy Issues

The Ministry of Training and Distance Learning recognizes the vast categories of public policies and a range of specific issues that continue to be addressed in order to position Trinidad and Tobago as a regional leader in distance learning.

Management of the System

To this end a Cabinet-appointed Management Committee has been established to oversee and monitor implementation of the distance learning programme, and to serve in an advisory capacity regarding the operations of the National Distance Learning System. The membership of this committee is representative of major stakeholders of the education system - the Ministry of Education, the University of the West Indies, the College of Science Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago, the Office of the Attorney General, the Ministry of Finance, private sector distance education providers (ROYTEC), and the telecommunications sector.

Access

Meeting student demand: The establishment of community based distance learning centres and virtual classrooms will ensure that all citizens have equitable access to appropriate programmes.

Institutional strengthening/capacity building: Developing a cadre of qualified professionals to guide the instructional process is critical to

the acceptance of distance learning and quality assurance in content development and delivery as well as the management of the national system. Provision has been made for continuing training in distance education for all categories of staff through participation in training programmes, staff attachments, sourcing short-term consultancies and the like.

Costs/provision of resources: Whereas distance education may make it possible to expand education without investment in buildings, it needs a higher investment in course development and the technological infrastructure necessary to facilitate distance delivery. The provision of material resources to facilitate distance learning is made from public funds. Budgetary commitment is enshrined. Any fee reduction realized as a result of negotiations with education providers (the Distance Learning Secretariat will perform some administrative responsibilities for the providers on exchange for a reduced fee structure) will be transferred to the student to ensure that education is not only accessible, but affordable.

Distance Learning for 'All' of Education

Given the number of nationals with incomplete secondary level certification, as well as students who are inadequately prepared and require remediation, distant learning modalities would be instituted to augment universal access to educational opportunities and improve participation ratio particularly at the tertiary level.

The establishment of virtual classrooms in secondary schools, community colleges, and teacher training institutions will ensure that all education in Trinidad and Tobago will be delivered in a dual mode in the not too distant future.

Distance Learning Ownership

Intellectual property rights, copyright and royalties are major issues for distance educators. It is proposed that the government will invest in distance learning course development. Legislation will be enshrined to define ownership and royalty rights of distance learning materials and courses and ensure that all materials developed with government funding will be available to all institutions for use at minimal cost.

Technology Infrastructure

Recognizing the pivotal role of technology in distance learning delivery, the core component of an infrastructure network will be provided by the state. The government is providing the technological infrastructure to facilitate distant delivery.

Engaging distance modalities for education delivery necessitates access to technology by both students and instructors. Making technology a requirement necessitates financial support. Computer loan facilities have been provided.

Student Services

- A National Resource Facility is being developed at the Secretariat to provide a distance learning walk-in Educational Information Centre that employs television, computers, video and print modalities.
- The creation of a web site - www.dls.gov.tt is an essential service.
- Budgetary commitment has been made for the engagement of a student support services coordinator.

Distance Learning Projections

The Ministry of Training and Distance Learning sees the way forward to a sustainable distance learning system being in the direction of:

- Continuing partnership initiatives with public and private educational institutions, private sector companies and quasi-governmental agencies to promote entrepreneurship, national skills development, literacy, enhance rural educational upgrading and training in entrepreneurial activities.
- The utilization of distance learning modalities to fuel national education approaches - formal, non-formal, public and private, to facilitate retraining and human resource development for social and economic development.
- Comprehensive studies to inform distance learning strategies and approaches and influence policy succession regarding the adoption of appropriate new technologies and management systems.
- Comprehensive strategic and operational planning involving all major national stakeholders.
- Aggressive staff recruitment, training and development.
- Establishing of a distance learning standards body.
- Fostering locally developed programmes for cultural development (private and social), as well as for certification.
- Exploring with local, regional and international information technology industries and educational institutions the development of a learning technologies industry for domestic and export purposes.
- Development of industries in the advanced training technology sector, which will profit

from the innovative environment, trained staff and advanced telecom infrastructure.

Conclusion

The distance education initiative of the Ministry

of Training and Distance Learning is an attempt to improve educational opportunities for the Trinidad and Tobago citizenry. The distance learning innovation is intended to facilitate lifelong learning, thereby fostering national growth and development.