

Creating Inter-Institutional Partnerships Across Frontiers In Distance Education. The ITM Experience.

ABSTRACT

Distance education and open learning in Malaysia are presently seeing revolutionary changes.

The unprecedented development of distance education in recent years, coupled with a positive governmental stance towards it, has propelled monumental changes in this country. Distance education is therefore poised to achieve a 'mega business' status, in direct competition with traditional face-to-face education for adult and continuing education. Ellen D. Wagner in a recent paper on 'Success Factors in Distance Education' (Adult Learning, September/October 1995) emphasised that "one of the greatest challenges-and one of the greatest strengths - of distance education comes from inter-institutional partnerships."

This paper would essentially look at this aspect of distance education with regard to the MARA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (ITM)'s role in instrumenting collaboration with other countries and institutions in the past few years. It would also explore possibilities of identifying areas that still require cooperation; especially in the areas of postgraduate education; materials production and the use of technology to meet local and cultural needs.

The problems faced in this endeavour and the challenges that are to be met would be identified in its ongoing efforts to meet the standards and quality which it has so ardently set out to achieve.

Understanding Distance Education

It was only in the nineteenth century that organised adult education began in Europe and North America and the methods of distance education gradually evolved to meet needs that were hitherto not easily met by other modes of education. Prior to this, formal education was for a long time a luxury enjoyed by financially or otherwise privileged groups-and to a large extent was meant for children and youngsters.

The need to 'study alongside paid work and for individualised learning' (Holmberg 1995, 47) as differentiated from formal classroom learning, in the later half of the nineteenth century, was in fact the impetus for the genesis of distance education. Distance education has given the gifted and the hard-working people an opportunity to study, besides having a job and other commitments, such as having a family or of having to look after the sick.

The only media available to distance education during the early pioneering era and even up to the second half of the twentieth century, were print - the written word and phonograph. As such, it is not surprising that traditional correspondence education thus emerged. An organised, or institutionalised form of teaching and learning was really the important ingredient in the operation of correspondence education. A 1979 UNESCO definition of correspondence education interestingly notes the influence of technology with the advent of tape recordings when it says that correspondence education is, "Education conducted by postal services without face-to-face contact between teacher and learner. Teaching is done by written or tape-recorded materials sent to the learner, whose progress is monitored through written or taped exercises to the teacher, who

corrects them and returns them to the learner with criticisms and advice" (Keegan 1991,29).

Distance education which expanded steadily from these humble beginnings, hardly experienced any cataclysmic changes in the intervening period until around 1970. What was significant was that only more sophisticated forms of methods and media were used. However, the founding of the British Open University in 1969 heralded a more prestigious era in distance education and created the watershed between the earlier forms of correspondence education and distance education as is seen today. This period marks the beginning of degree-giving distance-teaching universities with full degree programmes, sophisticated courses, new media and systematic systems evaluation that confer prestige on distance education (Rumble and Harry, 1982).

Borje Holmberg believes that since the creation of the Open University in the United Kingdom, the image of distance education has changed and has in fact gained the respect as 'a publicly acknowledged type of education acclaimed as an innovative promise for the future' (1995,49). It would be pertinent to note that in the 1990s some 30 distance-teaching universities have been active in various parts of the world.

At this juncture I would like to highlight the fact that distance education is not identical with open learning even though the distinction is often blurred in today's usage. Essentially, openness as to entry, choice of content and learning strategies can well be combined with distance education, but need not be so. Lewis and Spenser give us a broad definition of open learning as opposed to other definitions when they say that, "Open learning is a term used to describe courses flexibly designed to meet individual requirements. It is often applied to provision which tries to remove barriers that prevent attendances at more traditional courses, but it also suggests a learner-centred philosophy. Open learning courses may be offered in a

learning centre of some kind or most of the activity may be carried out away from such a centre (e.g. at home)" (Lewis and Spenser, 1986).

Distance education as we understand it today is succinctly defined by Keegan (1990, 44) who says that it is a form of education characterised by

the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education);

the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes)

the use of technical media—print, audio, video or computer — to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course;

the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education); and

the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and in groups with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

Michael Moore, writing in 1990 stresses that, "Distance education consists of all arrangements for providing instruction through print or electronic communications media to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors" (Moore, XV).

In tracing the progress of distance education in the twentieth century, it appears that development is along a two-pronged line. On the one hand, with the advent of information technology and modern media such as video conferencing, hypertext, computers and internet, a large-scale approach is seen where courses are produced for hundreds and thousands of students with a few tutors who may not usually be concerned with course development. On the other hand, a small-scale approach is still maintained with the course writer also in-charge of tutoring, as in the case of dual-mode universities and colleges. The Mara Institute of Technology (ITM) falls into this category.

Distance Education in Malaysia

Distance education seems to be rushing in at an unprecedented rate within the Asian region especially and several governments are planning a major expansion of student numbers. Existing Open Universities in China, India, Korea and Taiwan will continue to expand (Rumble, 1992) while Bangladesh faced the challenges of establishing its own Open University (Shamsher Ali, 1994).

There are no plans for the establishment of an Open University in Malaysia currently, as indicated by the Honourable Minister of Education, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (The Star, July 26, 1996). However, some catalytic changes are seen in the area of distance education in Malaysia. On October 7, 1994 it was announced in Parliament by the Honorable Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Annuar Ibrahim when tabling the Budget Speech, that it would be mandatory for all Universities and institutions of higher learning in the country to introduce distance education courses. With such an endorsement by the government, the position and status of distance education will most undoubtedly assume a more dynamic role in the foreseeable future.

To facilitate the take-off and orchestration of distance education programmes in the country on a more structured basis, a joint-committee was formed with representations from the major universities and ITM. The committee discussed inter alia, the allocation of different courses among the different universities, lines of co-operation especially in the area of use of media, educational technology and planning on a global scale, to ensure overall success in this massive exercise of implementing distance education on a country-wide basis. This exercise seen as a positive step taken by policy makers and members of the highest echelons of the academic cadre endorses Wagner's claim that, "One of the greatest challenges - and one of the greatest strengths - of distance education comes from inter-institutional partnerships," (Wagner, 1995).

In a written reply to a member of Parliament the Honourable Minister of Education had confirmed that seven universities in the country namely, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, Universiti Malaya and the Mara Institute of Technology (ITM) had opened its doors to more students by conducting distance learning programmes (The Star, July 26 1996).

Currently, tertiary education is offered by 8 universities, 2 institutions of higher learning, 43 private colleges and 7 polytechnics (Min. of Edu., 1992). The first private university, Universiti Telekom or Unitel has been approved by the National Council on Higher Education and will begin its first academic session in May 1997 (The Star, October 9, 1996). The next few years would also see the birth of a few other private universities that are currently awaiting official sanction.

Distance education courses in Malaysia were until recently mainly offered by ITM, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and a few courses are offered by the Medical Faculty of the National University of Malaysia (UKM) (Szarina Abdullah and Jayati Roy, 1994, 7). Numerous private colleges in the country offer programmes in collaboration with overseas universities, polytechnics and other institutions of learning leading to the award of diplomas, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and certificates. Many such programmes are advertised and called 'distance learning' programmes but do not form part of this discussion.

Distance education in Malaysia is a dual mode system. The Centre for Off-Campus Studies (COCS) of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was established in 1971 and Dhanaraj (1986) has traced its development since the inception of the university in 1969. Many of its programmes are described in detailed in various papers published (Choo 1980, Alsagoff 1988, Rozhan Mohd. Idrus & Ab.Rashid Mat Zin 1992, Quasim Ahmad 1993). A recent announcement (The Star, October 9, 1996) stated that USM's COCS is now offering a Bachelor of Engineering in civil, electrical, electronic, chemical, mechanical and petroleum engineering in addition to their B.Sc., BA, and B.Soc.Sc. undergraduate programmes.

The increased awareness and interest in distance education in Malaysia is seen in the response that Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) received for first undergraduate distance learning programmes. 8,000 applications were received and today 2,800 have enrolled in its 13 regional learning centres throughout Peninsular Malaysia, for its undergraduate programmes in mathematics with education, business administration and communication and psychology (New Straits Times, July 25, 1996). The West Malaysia Malay Teachers Association is collaborating with UKM in organising the distance learning programmes.

UKM's Medical Faculty had in 1993 in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) designed a postgraduate programme for physicians to upgrade their knowledge and skills in Family Medicine.

ITM's Distance Education Programme

Among the universities and institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, ITM is the largest in terms of student enrollment, staff size and physical infrastructures. Established in 1956 as a small training college for Bumiputra (Malay) para-professional education the institute has since metamorphosed into a significant network of one main campus and 11 branch campuses located in the different states in the country. Present student enrollment is in the region of 28,000, while some 95 academic programmes are offered to students in 12 schools and 3 academic centres. 17 diploma courses offered by ITM are recognised by the Government to be on par with general and honours degrees, while all

of its 33 advanced diploma courses are considered to be on par with a Bachelor's degree (The Star, August 1 1996).

Cognisant of the need for continuing education among the working adults

of society, ITM established the Centre for External Education in 1973. Classes are held after office hours on weekdays and on weekends and courses are patterned after the full-time mainstream programmes. The traditional mode of teaching with face-to-face communication is employed, while the testing and evaluation of students are carried out on the same basis. The diplomas awarded to graduates of the external programme enjoy the same recognition as those offered to the full-time students and as such no differentiation is made between students enrolled in this programme and those in the mainstream. Diplomas offered are in the following fields of study:

- Accountancy
- Business and Management
- Law
- Public Administration
- Mass Communication
- Computer Science

About 3,700 students have graduated from the Centre's External Programme since 1978 (Abdullah & Roy, 1994, 9).

The success of the external programme propelled the Centre towards embarking upon the distance mode. In 1990 therefore, three programmes were offered via distance education, leading to the award of Diplomas in Business Studies, Banking and Public Administration. With the support of the administration and other enthusiastic faculty members, the strength of the courses grew steadily and the current student enrollment of more than 4,500 lend testimony to this.

The increased interest of students per se in the distance education programmes and current public policy considerations, has helped to garner the credibility of the distance education programmes offered as a valid and justifiable mode of education vis-à-vis the conventional and contiguous mode of education. As such, this has necessitated the revision of existing programmes and instructional materials and the use of media and technology used; notwithstanding the need for an enhancement in staff training and research; and for the revitalisation of student and staff support systems in all the branches where distance education courses were offered.

Globalisation and Partnerships

No discussion on collaboration and partnerships today can ignore the dominating forces of globalisation, which can be taken to mean 'the

compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole' (Robertson 1992). This implies a shrinking of the world so that people, services and goods are available to each other across the entire globe through a number of means and in an increasingly immediate world. Globalisation focuses on the significance of technology, and developments in global electronic and telecommunications technology and global media. There is in fact a compression of time and space considerations as a result of this.

As borders open up across the world with the globalisation process and as inherited boundaries such as the nation state become more permeable, global 'traffic' is increasing in intensity. Education today can be viewed as a commodity which is most readily exportable in an increasingly competitive world market. It is not surprising therefore, that distance and open learning which is significantly associated with the challenges of the new communications technologies, is more and more intimately bound with the globalisation thesis.

Furthermore, as the most pertinent characteristics of distance education have been described by its supporters to be its potential for independence or flexibility, it ideally matches concepts of globalisation which also impinge upon time and space considerations as its most salient features. Holmberg in this same vein asserted that, "distance education can be extremely flexible. It is adaptable to students' conditions in that they can learn anywhere and at any time"(Holmberg 1995, 165).

Applying concepts of industrial production to distance education is not new. As such, concepts related to Fordism, post-Fordism and post-modernity have occupied much intellectual debate in the context of distance education in recent years. This period of intense globalisation in fact signifies a move into post-Fordism where the emphasis no longer rests with mass production and the producer (as in the case of Fordism) but with the consumer. Previously, for cost-effectiveness there had to be mass production techniques and Otto Peters used this concept for large-scale providers of distance education such as the Open University UK (Peters, 1983).

The small-scale post-Fordist model on the other hand provides for decentralisation and for a return to a craft-based system very much like ITM's small-scale, mixed-mode programme and the popular programmes in Australia. These are clear examples of the post-Fordist model. Undoubtedly, with the advent of new computer mediated communications and telecommunications technologies, learners and providers are increasingly available on a global scale to be in touch with one another. It is no surprise therefore that Evans and Nation suggest that 'distance education and open learning have been key dispersal agents in the movement towards a post-industrial society' (Evans & Nation,

1992,18).

ITM and the Creation of Partnerships

The above overview provides a conceptual framework within which collaborations and partnerships in distance education may be viewed.

ITM's distance learning programme is relatively new when compared to other institutions around the world, however, as many of the challenges and problems facing the programme in the initial period have been overcome and as we have moved into a more formative period in its development; this would be a critical period for fostering collaboration with other institutions and other countries.

ITM has been fortunate that at this juncture policy considerations have helped in engendering this aim. The ITM (Amendment) Bill which was tabled to Parliament on July 29, 1996 and which is expected to be gazetted at the time of writing (October 17, 1996) would inter alia provide for ITM 'to generate its own financing, open branches overseas and confer degrees and honorary awards' (The Star August 4, 1996). In addition, it is hoped that the Act it would help foster more intercourse between ITM and other developing countries where ITM's expertise and services in setting up programmes on joint-venture or twinning basis would be harnessed.

The Honourable Minister of Education, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said that "The success of ITM in social engineering has been impressive and Malaysia can be used as a guide to create a balancing factor to extend educational opportunities to the less fortunate" (The Star August 1, 1996).

Many lessons can be learnt of the benefits and problems associated with the politics of collaboration from other institutions of open and distance learning. Notable among these have been the Open Tech programme in the UK, the Indira Gandhi National Open University's collaboration with other Open Universities, the Canadian Distance-Learning Development Centre, the work of the Commonwealth of Learning and the collaboration between Athabasca University and Rhamkhamhaeng University in Thailand (Ross 1990,150). Paul Ross is right in pointing out that 'Without denying the natural tendency of people in organisations to do things 'their' way, there is increasing realisation that there are many benefits to cooperation and collaboration in the world of distance education" (1990, 144).

It is indeed commendable that ITM has moved in this right direction in negotiating for and planning collaboration in many areas within the fast expanding field of distance education.

A workshop was held in December 1994 for the training of staff members in the area of materials production by Dr. Fred Lockwood of the Open University UK This was again followed up by another workshop in September 1995 by him for a more intensive session on materials production. All participants were lecturers who were involved with the distance education programme. Different workshops were organised in 1995 and were conducted by staff members from the Regional English Language Centre (RELC) in Singapore and by Jim Taylor from Australia.

Notable among this, the recent visit of Dr. Ellie Chambers of the Open University UK from 16-25 June 1996, most significantly helped in furthering the philosophy of fostering a deeper relationship between the academicians and administrators from different cultures and environments, and between ITM and the Open University in particular. As a result, we in ITM were able to share and learn more on issues concerned with curriculum design, materials preparation, adult learners and current developments in the area of open and distance education in the United Kingdom and the Open University. Such visits are invaluable learning experiences for all parties concerned and do most manifestly extoll the benefits of collaboration and partnerships in distance education. It is hoped that this visit would help pave the way for greater collaboration between the Open University and ITM and for an interchange of ideas in the future (Chambers, E. August 1996).

Much still needs to be done in this area and the potential exists for enhanced collaboration and cooperation both between organisations both within the country and overseas. Potential areas of collaboration appear to be in the areas of staff training, materials production and the use of technology and media. Matching theory with practice is often the dilemma of the practitioner and it is no different in the case of ITM. Numerous constraints exist, yet as our past experiences show, we are moving in the right direction stealthily and surely.

Most undoubtedly, orchestrating and implementing such partnerships and collaborations is not possible without the foresight, persistence and dedication of those at the helm. ITM is indeed most fortunate in this respect. Its dynamic and forward-looking team of decision makers are imbued with the spirit that collaborations and partnerships are the order of the day, very much in keeping with Wagner's philosophy. Such successes are indeed the result of their fortitude as a commitment

towards ensuring standards and quality, which they have so ardently embraced.

Most importantly, although pressures for collaboration and networking are often both internally and externally driven, it is the student who would finally benefit, as new opportunities would be created which would not otherwise exist. Credit transfer arrangements, common admission banks and opportunities to study and live in different institutions and cultures would not be unrealisable objectives. Finally, it would be worth exploring another angle to this entire area as working towards the successes of these ventures often provides challenges and a stimulus that may kindle renewed interest and galvanise flagging enthusiasm. Though possessing their share of problems and failures, many collaborations and partnerships have in the past paved their way for greater efficiency and excellence.

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