

8 Distance Education

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After identifying some of the better known features of small nation states, such as national and local isolation, limitation of resources, human and financial, and the problems they present for the provision of educational services, Hilary Perraton goes on to suggest that distance education can help to alleviate or even overcome such constraints. However, the utilisation of this form of educational delivery can in itself present difficulties for small states although problems can be partially resolved through effective regional and Commonwealth co-operation.

In the second part of this chapter Kenneth Tsekoa identifies the origins of distance education programmes in Lesotho, the approaches that were used and the lessons that might be learnt from that country's experience.

General principles

Distance education has been defined as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner. It usually involves a combination of media. It embraces activities like the work of open universities, correspondence colleges, and education through satellite links. Distance education has been used, too, at many differ-

ent levels of education, ranging from basic education for adults who missed primary school to post-graduate continuing education.

It has been widely argued that one of its strengths is its ability to offer opportunities to students no matter how remote they are, which makes it relevant to questions of how best to use limited resources to meet the needs of the isolated learner. There are a number of examples in the Commonwealth of the effective use of distance education in the delivery of educational services, especially to more isolated areas of a country. These include the Australian schools of the air, which teach children in the outback, and the Canadian Provincial Ministry of Education correspondence colleges which teach adults and children in the remotest corners of the land. There is, too, important experience in the use of distance teaching specifically in small states of the Commonwealth. In the Caribbean and the South Pacific, satellites have been used by the regional universities to overcome barriers of distance. In Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, as in other Commonwealth countries, there are well established government correspondence colleges. In Mauritius, the College of the Air has nearly fifteen years of experience in extending education and in supporting curriculum reform.

Distance education can therefore be important in helping to meet the educational needs of small nation states for two main reasons. Firstly, it has the potential to widen educational opportunities for people who cannot get to a school or a campus. Secondly, where it brings in resources from outside, it can help overcome problems of local or national isolation. It can be important both for individual students outside school - such as adults wanting to improve their educational qualifications, or to get some continuing education - and for classes in school. Correspondence courses, for example, have been widely used in Canada and New Zealand to widen the scope of what can be taught in a remote school with a limited specialist staff.

But despite these possibilities, distance education presents two particular difficulties which need to be faced if it is to play a major role in educational development within small states. The first concerns

feedback and face-to-face support for the learner. Learning at a distance can be a cold, dispiriting, lonely and difficult activity. If there is no tutor nearby to help with difficulties in the text, a correspondence course can seem impossibly difficult. If there are no other students with whom to share difficulties, it is very easy to give up. If there is no mechanism for feedback, then learning can become a one-way process, in which the teacher's or correspondence course's knowledge is all-important and the student's of no account. And, if the isolated student has to wait for weeks or even months for a response to written work, then he or she is less likely ever to complete the course. Therefore, if distance teaching is to be effective, attention must be paid to arrangements for feedback, for face-to-face support, and for tutoring even for the remotest students, with all the logistical difficulties that this entails in, say, meeting the needs of Rodrigues, 350 miles east of Mauritius, or far into the depths of the Kalahari.

The second difficulty is about money. Distance education makes economic sense because resources are put into the careful writing, editing and production of teaching materials instead of into the employment of face-to-face teachers. Such projects become economically viable only if there are enough students for any one course. 'Enough' varies with the sophistication of the teaching method, the level of education, and the amount of face-to-face tutoring allowed for. It is therefore necessary to spread the production costs of materials over an adequate number of students, and this may cause particular difficulties in small countries. There may be too few students in many individual small states to justify the production of good courses.

So there is the paradox: distance education looks like one way of overcoming barriers of isolation and shortages of resources in small states, but cannot itself escape from just these constraints. What can be done? A three-fold strategy holds out some hope.

The first strategy is to think about group learning. If we can share learning difficulties with other students then we may overcome many of our difficulties even in the absence of a tutor. Group learning, offering some kind of face-to-face support, has been of key

importance in many distance-teaching programmes varying from radio schools teaching basic education to adults, to the in-service training of teachers in Tanzania. Thus, if a distance-teaching unit in a small state is to be successful, it needs, paradoxically, to work very hard at issues of face-to-face support, especially for its students in the more remote areas.

The second strategy is to think about turn-round time and about ways of getting swift communication between tutor and student. At least here, changing technology is on our side and satellite links may offer a potential for improvement. But at present they still are often too expensive for educational budgets and access is more limited in the more remote parts of small states. Thus the strategy is clear but the tactics are not.

The third strategy lies in Commonwealth co-operation, if this will allow distance educators in small states to co-operate in producing and using teaching materials. The savings are obvious: five countries may be able to share the costs of producing, say, a basic book-keeping course suitable for all five. And there are precedents here. The Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) supported the co-operative production of secondary-level courses in Botswana and Lesotho in the late 1970s. Universities in Malaysia, Australia and Canada are already working together to write courses. But difficulties remain. Some are psychological: we often think we can write a better course than one we can borrow, or even share in writing. Co-operation in teaching, as opposed to research, goes against the grain of institutional autonomy. Some are organisational: outside the two regional universities (the University of the South Pacific and the University of the West Indies) there is a lack of an organisational structure for such co-operation, although this is an issue which was addressed by the Expert Group on Distance Education and Open Learning, the report of which was considered by Commonwealth Heads of Government and Commonwealth Ministers of Education during 1987.

The most interesting and important difficulties are educational. They concern the balance between what can be produced centrally,

or internationally, and what needs to be produced locally. Few subjects are entirely universal, and few entirely local. Reconciling what can be produced economically, and for several countries, with the particular needs of adults or children in one country is all important. And that reconciliation may best depend on group study. For if people can jointly work on materials that come from outside their community, and together see where they are relevant and where irrelevant to their own community, then they may be able to get the best of both worlds, tailoring to their own needs material of which they would otherwise be deprived.

To sum up, distance education can help with the problems of isolation and of resources. It will do so successfully only if four conditions are met:

- 1 National or local institutions exist to run distance education;
- 2 These institutions set up local support arrangements, probably based on group study, which allow face-to-face study to back teaching materials brought from outside;
- 3 Teaching materials are developed on a scale big enough to allow adequate resources to be devoted to this development;
- 4 International co-operative structures are created to help small and large states to co-operate in the development and use of distance teaching materials.

The case of Lesotho

Distance education in Lesotho was started in response to three main needs. Firstly, the large number of adults who could not gain access to secondary education or who dropped out before finishing secondary education. Secondly, the large number of literate adults who had no learning materials to improve their daily life activities. Finally, the needs of young people and adults who were illiterate or semi-literate and which called for use of unconventional (non-classroom) approaches. The Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre (LDTC) was established in 1974 to meet these needs. Moreover, the growing

number of Basotho who enrolled with commercial correspondence colleges in South Africa (for courses following a different syllabus and at high cost) demonstrated a crying need to establish a local and more relevant institution.

Distance education in Lesotho operates in four main areas. These are correspondence courses for formal education; adult, non-formal education for literate Basotho; literacy and numeracy work; and service agency work.

Correspondence courses

Correspondence courses for Junior Certificate and 'O' Level are offered. The courses are based on syllabuses that are in use within the schools. A correspondence course package consists of workbooks (locally designed and produced), tutor marked assignments, a few text books, radio programmes for some subjects, as well as occasional face-to-face sessions. While most of the students study for examination purposes, some study to acquire specific skills such as book-keeping, agriculture and communication. Enrolments for 1985 give an idea of the numbers involved. At the Junior Certificate level a total of 1,437 students were enrolled. At the 'O' Level, a total of 576 students were enrolled. In addition, a teachers upgrading course has used distance education. From 1980-84, approximately 1,500 teachers without qualifications were upgraded and certificated in close collaboration with the National Teacher Training College.

Non-formal education

The non-formal education programmes comprise simply written booklets addressing specific topics of interest to rural Basotho. They are written in the local language - Sesotho. Examples include cookery, animal diseases, vegetable growing, child care, expecting a baby and how to knit. The clientele for these include rural farmers, housewives and others engaged in the struggle to make a living in rural Lesotho. Use of educational radio programmes in support of these booklets, as well as active encouragement for group work are important features of this programme. This aspect of distance

education typifies a peculiarly African concept - that education should involve an individual 'from the cradle to the grave'. Over 80,000 adults benefit from these programmes. The 'curricula' are determined by the clientele themselves through needs assessment surveys carried out by the LDTC.

Literacy and numeracy

The literacy and numeracy programmes use workbooks, games, group study as well as some face-to-face teaching. The clientele includes unschooled herdboys, illiterate farmers, illiterate housewives and others. At the village level groups are helped by a literate group leader or facilitator. At the area or district level the facilitators' activities are co-ordinated by a learning post monitor (an employee of the LDTC) who trains facilitators, monitors progress and provides feedback to the LDTC. The post-literacy materials include leaflets, booklets, pamphlets and a regular newspaper supplement. All these address topics of interest to the learners. Over 20,000 benefit from these programmes.

Service agency work

Use of distance teaching approaches is often preferred by government and non-government organisations. These include health organisations, rural development organisations, adult/non-formal education organisations, agricultural institutions and women's organisations. With its expertise and experience in the design, development and printing of educational materials, the LDTC has been able to offer assistance in the use of this approach. Design and production of posters, leaflets, booklets, photo-strips, workbooks and educational radio programmes by the LDTC have facilitated use of distance teaching methods. Reasonable and affordable fees are charged for these services.

Lessons learnt

A number of lessons have been learnt over the years. Firstly, the role of research and evaluation is crucial to the growth and proper use of

distance teaching methods. The direction, size of programme and choice of media can be determined systematically by deliberate research and evaluation.

Secondly, collaboration and co-operation with other educational institutions within the country and in the sub-region pays dividends. Sharing limited human resources with others, sharing plans and progress reports, jointly producing educational materials and generally developing the collective human resource capacity have all been important and gratifying. Through a sub-regional distance education association, institutions in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland have benefited greatly from such co-operation and collaboration.

Finally, we have learnt that the role of distance education can be most beneficial in adult/non-formal education. While our search for alternatives to schooling has been a major preoccupation, a lot of attention has had to be given to ways of promoting lifelong education. This has proved to be the real strength of endeavours in Lesotho.