



## Focus Report :

### Distance Education in Papua New Guinea

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#### ABSTRACT :

Distance Education has gained prominence over the last decade due to various educational, technological and environmental reasons. Advances in educational and telecommunications technologies have been at the centre of the thrust in this push for more students choosing to study at a distance. In Papua New Guinea, the thrust has been due to socio-economic and financial constraints. In this paper, the author reports on distance education developments in Papua New Guinea.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Papua New Guinea gained its independence from Australia in September 1975. Administratively, the country is divided into 20 provinces and the provinces are run by Provincial Governments, headed by a Governor. Reading People Count (1995) one notes that geographically the country consists of the eastern part of the New Guinea Island (with Indonesia to the west) and numerous smaller islands, the largest of which are New Britain, New Ireland, North Solomon and Manus. The report notes, further, that “much of the terrain is extremely rugged with high mountain ranges and steep valleys with fast flowing rivers. In contrast, along the coast there is an extensive system of marshes. The country has only a few major roads, many

areas being accessible only by air, foot or boat.”

The 1990 Population Census figures from The People Count gave the total population of Papua Guinea as being approximately 3,761,954. This was further broken down into 1,898,583 Males and 1,781,371 Females. The population distribution was given as 15.4% living in urban areas and the majority 84.6% as living in rural areas. This indicates that the population of the country is predominantly rural based. A National Census was conducted in 2000. The figures given by the National Statistical Office (2001) put the population at 5,130,365. This is further broken down into 2,661,091 Males and 2,469,274 Females. The rural to urban ratio remains about the same.

The geographic distribution of the population introduces factors that have strong influence into the practice of distance

education in the country. Since the majority of the population is rural based, we cannot take advantage of most of the benefits brought about by advances in educational and telecommunications technologies. Access to modern technology is limited in rural areas. So how do we reach the rural areas? At the moment, the government cannot afford to put educational, health and other necessary facilities in every rural community. A well-organised national distance education plan can help solve some of the educational problems.

Distance education can help increase access to education and the government is finding it difficult to take services to every community in the country. Though the country is rich in mineral and timber resources the previous governments have tended to ignore the rural population. Amenities are concentrated in the minority population in the cities, ignoring the majority in the rural areas. Some of the problems of access and equity are being addressed through distance education.

## 2. STATUS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA :

The development of distance education has been influenced by the geographical set up of Papua New Guinea. Blainey (1996) in writing about distance education and its provision in Australia coined the regularly cited phrase 'The Tyranny of Distance'. In Papua New Guinea, we are overpowered by the 'The Tyranny of Terrain'. As reported earlier, most of the country is not easily accessible. This has great impact on the choice of educational media for the delivery of distance education to the majority of the population that need it. Factors that influence the choice of educational media in Papua New Guinea are discussed fully in Nyondo (1999). At the moment, distance education in Papua New Guinea is mainly print-based. And we envisage that print will continue to dominate for a long time as the main medium for distance education in Papua New Guinea.

Distance Education in Papua New Guinea started at the Correspondence School

in 1952. The Correspondence School has since changed its name to the College of Distance Education based in Port Moresby, the national Capital. Currently, there are a number of institutions that are involved in providing distance education in the country. The institutions offer a variety of programmes. A brief description of each is given below:

- College of Distance Education (CODE), in Port Moresby, formerly called the Correspondence School. This is the responsibility of the national Department of Education. Established in 1952, it is the oldest distance education institution in the country. The College of Distance Education offers programmes that range from grades 7 to 10 and a Certificate in Business, a post-secondary programme. There is a network of Provincial Centres that are responsible for enrolment, counselling, marking of students' assignments and general administration. The network is now linked by CODENET, a computer network, which has greatly enhanced data collection and administration.

- Department of Open and Distance Learning (DODL) at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology in Lae. Established in 1993, DODL offers a Matriculation programme, a Diploma in Commerce majoring in Accounting and students are about to enrol in a Diploma in Mathematics for Teachers (Secondary).

- Institute of Distance and Continuing Education (IDCE) at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in Port Moresby. Established in 1985, IDCE offers the same Diploma in Commerce majoring in Accounting as DODL. At IDCE, some degree and diploma courses are available in Education, Arts and Law. In 2002, the IDCE changed its name again to University of Papua New Guinea Open College. They have upgraded 5 of their provincial centres to what they are now calling 'Open Campus'.

Pacific Adventist University, in Port Moresby, formerly called The Pacific Adventist College, is privately owned and offers Matriculation programmes. The university was founded by the Seventh Day Adventist Church. It has now expanded to include Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of

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- Business and Bachelor of Science degrees. These degree programmes are mainly residential.
- Divine Word University in Madang. This is a privately run university. It offers a postgraduate diploma in Administration and Management of Education in the distance mode. Although, the programmes have a residential component.
- There are also a number of foreign institutions, mainly from Australia, offering distance learning programmes.

The Diploma in Commerce and most of the subjects in the matriculation programmes offered by IDCE and DODL used to be exactly the same until recently (2002). A student could start by enrolling into a programme at one of the institutions and complete the programme at the other. The programmes were developed jointly. There used to be a joint Committee that looked at the development of joint distance education programmes between the University of Papua New Guinea (IDCE in particular) and the Papua New Guinea University of Technology (DODL in particular). This joint Committee helped in consolidating the partnership that existed between the University of Papua New Guinea and the Papua New Guinea University of Technology. The two institutions have developed different programmes, and there is minimal co-operation at the moment. The different institutions have slightly different organisational structures for managing and running distance education programmes. Pacific Adventist College and Divine Word University both run all the programmes from one campus. DODL has three other sites in the Province of Manus, a group of Islands. These remote places are reached through audioconferencing. The main objective of the audioconferencing set-up was to create access at tertiary level (diploma and degree) for youths and adults who have the enthusiasm and interest to further their education beyond matriculation level. This project is described in detail in Nyondo (2000). DODL has other provincial centres.

Distance Education in Papua New Guinea has been based mainly on print materials. We are looking at other ways of increasing access to education in the

country. In the year 2000, the Commission for Higher Education undertook a 'Feasibility Study on Distance and Flexible Learning Through Electronic Media in Papua New Guinea'. The United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) sponsored the feasibility study. The Vice-Minister for Education announced the feasibility study in the media. The study was conducted by a group of consultants comprising Dr C Moore (Team Leader), Mr S Haihue and Mr D Kema (2000).

The main recommendation from the report was that the country should establish a 'National Open Learning Institution' to avoid spreading out the limited resources available. The institute is to establish learning centres in all provincial capitals funded by the national government.

Distance education is bridging an important gap in the education system of the country. The majority of the students completing Grade 12 cannot find places in tertiary institutions, as the places are limited. For this category, distance education is the only hope for possible advancement in society. The coming of political independence in 1975 gave the populace new hopes and aspirations. The people who reside in urban areas have adopted western-type lifestyles. One can only get a good job in the city if one has academic or professional qualifications. Distance education has been playing a big role in satisfying this need in the country.

All institutions at the moment offer formal programmes. The demand still remains unfulfilled. Non-formal programmes are almost non-existent at the moment. These are generally run as short courses or through pamphlets by Non-Governmental Organisations. Non-formal programmes are difficult to organise, as literacy level is very low in the country. The print medium is the one all the institutions involved in distance education are using. The use of videos, television computers and other technologies is not possible in the rural areas at the moment. Radio based programmes, if they were developed would be very popular and more accessible to the majority of the population.

### 3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS AFFECTING DISTANCE LEARNING :

In a country like Papua New Guinea where the education system cannot satisfy student demand for places as the student numbers that can be absorbed are limited we are left with distance education as the next best alternative. Although, it has its own characteristic problems associated with it, at the moment, distance education can contribute immensely to the development of an educated labour force.

It was encouraging to note the following remarks from the country's Vice Minister for Higher Education, Dr. John Waiko (1998).

'The Higher Education sector needs to shift its focus from the traditional site-based learning to take distance education to the people. This means that instead of students coming to centralised learning institutions, educational services will be taken to them.'

Whilst distance education is just one of the alternatives in most developed countries, sometimes it is the only choice in Papua New Guinea. The Government's ability to provide formal education for every eligible citizen is limited by financial constraints. The economic woes of the country are affecting many facets of people's lives, education being no exception.

A detailed report on how socio-economic factors affect distance education in Papua New Guinea is given in Nyondo & Koigiri (1998). These socio-economic factors include home and study environment, affordability of tuition fees, transportation and learner characteristics. All the above factors impact on attrition and failure rates. Attrition and failure rates at a Papua New Guinea institution are discussed in detail in Meek & Jones (1995).

Reasons given nowadays by distance students for failure and attrition include lack of place for study in the house or neighbourhood, homes usually busy with relatives through out the day, and sometimes a drop in motivation due to lack of support from immediate family members. It is reported in People Count (1995) that Papua New Guinea is essentially an agrarian

country. People, of all ages, work in various degrees in producing food for their family or for sale. Sometimes education is the last thing on their minds.

Community attitude to education has been found to be one of the social factors that can encourage or discourage the learning efforts of distance students studying at a distance and on their own. Full time students have the advantage of peer and other easily accessible support services.

In a country of high unemployment (though defined differently by developed nations) some communities do not regard education as a priority. They look at their children, who never made it to National High School or tertiary institution levels, as failures who floundered their chances. Hence, they are not willing to spend any more money on them. The idea of spending more money on them seems hard to cope with. This kind of attitude is slowly dissipating as more and more communities realise that education is the only hope for their offspring getting ahead in modern society.

The financial burden of coping with the tuition fees may be too much for most families. And unfortunately, there are no Government funded scholarships for distance education at the moment. There is a National Scholarship scheme established only for full time students in the universities and other tertiary institutions. Government funding for education has not improved. The annual budget allocation to the universities and other tertiary institutions has remained relatively the same for a number of years.

We cannot just look at the socio-economic factors affecting our students' learning in isolation. Individual learner characteristics also impinge on their learning capabilities. Campbel (1992) points out that elements such as age, maturity, and learning styles have been identified as characteristics that can impact the learning process of the distant student.

### 4. CONCLUSION :

The introduction of distance learning programmes in Papua New Guinea has

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forced the institutions into rethinking their long term plans, remodel institutional educational philosophies and shift the stance on the section of community that they service. The wider community has also changed its perception of the universities. Whereas before, the universities were seen as places that provided education to an elite minority, but now they also provide distance education programmes at the matriculation level as well. Though there are still academics in the universities who think that such programmes should be left to colleges to manage and that the universities should only be concerned with diploma and degree programmes.

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