

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA “2-3 September 2004, Jakarta, Indonesia”

I. Introduction

The terms *open learning* and *distance education* represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Internet-base information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web¹.

The objective of this paper is to review open and distance learning in the context of present challenges and opportunities, policy and strategy consideration, and identified initiatives in open and distance learning, including its role in capacity-building and international cooperation.

Major changes have occurred in the world economy. These demand the attention of governments for education and for human resource development. Many countries are struggling with limited access to education and training for children and young people, and at the same time have to address the basic needs of an older generation. Low quality and insufficient relevance are other concerns.

The rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the move towards more knowledge-intensive, interdependent and internationalized societies create new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of education. The growing digital divide is actually leading to greater inequalities in development.

For the *student/learner* open and distance learning means increased access and flexibility as well as the combination of work and education. It may also mean a more learner-centered approach, enrichment, higher quality and new ways of interaction. For *employers* it offers higher quality and usually cost-effective professional development in the workplace. It allows upgrading of skills, increase productivity and development of costs, of training time, and increased portability of training.

For government the potential is to increase the capacity and cost-effectiveness of education and training systems, to reach target groups with limited access to conventional education and training, to support and enhance the quality and relevance of existing educational structures, to ensure the connection of educational institutions and curricula to the emerging networks and information resources, and to promote innovation and opportunities for lifelong learning.

¹ UNESCO, 2002: Division of Higher Education, Paris.

II. Concept and contributions

The term open and distance learning reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner, and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. The historical evolution of distance learning systems has been in four main phases. Open and distance learning systems can usually be described as made up of a range of components such as: the mission or goal of a particular system, programmes and curricula, teaching/learning strategies and techniques, learning material and resources, communication and interaction, support and delivery systems, students, tutors, staff and other experts, management, housing and equipment, and evaluation.

Sometimes, open and distance learning is used for school-age children and youth that are unable to attend ordinary schools, or to support teaching in schools, both at primary and secondary level. However, most courses and programmes are targeted at adult population. In developing countries in particular distance education for school equivalency is an important way of expanding educational opportunities to the adult population. Open schools that use a variety of media are of particular interest to high-population countries.

Teacher training is an important area where open and distance learning has made a major contribution. This includes initial training for formal qualification, in-service supplementary training for formal upgrading, and continuing in-service training in particular subjects and topics. Many examples, particularly from developing countries, show that teacher training at a distance may reach large groups of teachers and have profound impact on the development of national education systems. The use of open and distance learning for teacher education is therefore a crucial strategy when expansion or quality improvement is needed in the public education system.

A common need in many countries is to upgrade teachers' knowledge and competence in using new ICTs, in particular the rich instructional and information resources available on the Web. In such cases it is also very appropriate to use the new technologies in the training programme for teachers.

Both private and public providers have made important contributions to the development of industry and trade through programmes for technical and vocational education. Core purposes include the ability to respond flexibly to the need for working adults to obtain training, and to provide opportunities for those most disadvantaged by existing provision. The capacity of open and distance learning to support large-scale campaigns, e.g. in the field of HIV/AIDS education, is significant in the context of continued education and training.

Non-formal education and community development represent other sectors where open and distance learning is increasingly used. Programmes at a distance often reach substantial numbers of women, in societies where women lack equal opportunities for participation in conventional forms of education and training. Open and distance learning approaches lend themselves to the teaching of many of the complex issues of the modern world, in which input from a variety of disciplines is necessary.

Distance education at tertiary level shows a two-fold development pattern. On the one hand, numerous single mode open universities have emerged to absorb large numbers of new learners, while, on the other hand, increasing numbers of traditional universities have begun to offer their programmes also through distance education. The development of new ICTs has reinforced this trend.

Open and distance learning has the potential to generate new patterns of teaching and learning. Strongly linked with developments in information and communication technologies, it is close to the development of new learning needs and new patterns of information access and application and learning. There is evidence that it can lead to innovation in mainstream education, and may even have effects beyond the realm of education itself. Open and distance learning therefore plays an especially decisive role in the creation of the global knowledge-based society.

III. ICT use in education

At present, Cambodia has no specific policy regarding information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) focuses its educational resources on basic education, with pre-primary and primary education accounting for nearly 70% of public expenditure on education. In recent years, MoEYS has undertaken a reform process focused on developing a sector-wide approach to education.

The government of Cambodia has taken several steps towards the development of a national ICT policy. On 23 August 2000, the government established the National Information Communications Technology Development Authority (NIDA), with the Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen as chairman. The main responsibilities of NIDA are (1) to formulate policies on information technology (IT) promotion and development, (2) to oversee implementation of IT policies to ensure economic growth, and (3) to monitor and evaluate all IT-related projects in the country.

NIDA, in partnership with the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) and UNESCO, organized the first National Information Technology Awareness Seminar in September 2001, which was attended by representatives from the national government and private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international institution. The prime minister opened the seminar by presenting the six elements critical to a long-term vision for IT in Cambodia:

- Developing telecommunication infrastructures through liberalization, strengthening the regulatory framework and competition;
- Expanding Internet coverage by attracting private investment;
- Standardizing the Khmer language for computer use and improving English language abilities;
- Increasing computer literacy by for example including it in the curriculum of every secondary school and university;

- Ensuring the private sector participates in IT development for the purpose of transferring technology and technical skills;
- Protecting intellectual capital and prevention of computer crimes

In February 2003, the MoEYS, with the support of UNESCO office in Cambodia, held a roundtable to formulate policies and strategies on ICT use in education.

- ICTs as a need for all teachers and students;
- ICTs as a teaching and learning tool and as a subject itself;
- ICTs as a mean to improve productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of education management;
- ICTs for the promotion of Education for All through distance education and self-learning.

On 3 July 2003, the government held the National Meeting on the Formulation of National ICT Policies and Strategies to continue its work in this area.

IV. Distance Education Initiatives

Distance Learning Office was officially opened in 1995 within the Teacher Training Department in which there are 7 staff members.

In early 1995, we found out that some primary school teachers were not competent enough to conduct their lessons and did not proper learning strategies and skills. This is one among the other main issues that the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has to pay attention to. In order to address this issue, MoEYS has conducted some different workshops on "Teaching Methodologies" for teachers from schools around Phnom Penh and for teachers in the provinces. However, some teachers could not attend the workshops because they have some difficulties, such as they have no means of transport, some of them live in a very remote area, and some of others cannot afford to come and stay during their workshops.

In Cambodia although distance learning programme has not been implemented in a new technological means like using E-mail, Internet, TV, telephone, radio that other developed countries have used. The MoEYS has distributed some self-learning packages regularly to those targeted teachers round the country.

Aims of Distance Learning Programme

- To improve basic knowledge of the primary school teachers, so that they can apply their knowledge to pupils;
- To enhance their teaching competency using "Child-center" approach to enable them to teach more effectively so that pupils can learn more easily

- To provide an opportunity for the primary school teachers to direct their self-learning.

Open and distance learning was the major educational innovation of the 20th century. The task for the 21st century is fully to harness the potential of open and distance learning so that humankind can finally achieve its long-declared goal of quality education for all².

² John Daniel, assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO