Open and Distance Learning for Sustainable Development: Lessons from Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides the theoretical framework as well as the measures to be taken for the sustainable development of open and distance learning in Myanmar. In view to create a sustainable educational system that can generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the 21st century, the Ministry of Education, Union of Myanmar, has implemented many short-term and long-term educational programmes. The evenly balanced functional and effective process mechanisms implemented by open and distance learning as well as reinforced and strengthened by the e-education programmes, have indeed created and generated sustainable development in building capacity resources of the nation.

Key words: sustainable development; open and distance learning in Myanmar; e-education programmes; capacity resources.

Introduction

Education has been the most important functional and effective organ in the social, economic and cultural development of any nation. In the Union of Myanmar, the responsibility for education lies with the state. The Ministry of Education (MOE) oversees all matters concerning education in the nation – formal as well as non-formal. The vision of Myanmar Education is to create an education system that can generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the Knowledge Age.

Myanmar, today, is building the information technology infrastructure for improving the scope, quality and efficiency of its educational institutions. One major step in this endeavour is the introduction of e-education in Myanmar. E-education is the outcome of distance education.

In view to create a sustainable educational system that can generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the 21st century, the MOE, Union of Myanmar, near the turn of the century, has implemented many short-term and long-term educational programmes.

Distance Learning in Myanmar

Today, in Myanmar, two distance education universities are providing a greater access to higher education, which is accessible to any region at any time.

An important feature of the distance education system of Myanmar is that the instructional process is carefully designed as a system that enable the flow of teaching from the teaching agency through materials production and various media to the learners. The responses of the students regarding their learning ability and information on educational

programmes and services rendered by the University of Distance Education (Yangon and Mandalay) flow back through the system to the respective academic and administrative departments, which assess, monitor and take necessary action so that the standards of good educational quality are met as outlined by the University.

Myanmar distance education has passed the two generations of distance educational technology. The 1st generation of distance education teaching-learning system used low-tech media characterized by no interaction, that is, printed materials and radio broadcast. The 2nd generation distance education teaching-learning system used one-way multimedia courses characterized by delivery of broadcast (radio, TV, cassette tape, CD-ROM and data broadcasting system via satellite). At present, distance education in Myanmar has entered the third generation phase whereby satellite based media have been utilized, i.e., asynchronously interactive course characterized by delivery of telecast lectures (data broadcasting system and VSAT network) with call in interactivity (during or after) either by phone or e-mail.

Under the changing situation worldwide both socially and economically, the demand of distance education is growing rapidly. So also is the distance education programmes in Myanmar. Hence, the distance education programmes are in the phase of implementing the 4th generation distance learning system, that is, characterized by web pages with online syllabus, chat sessions offering "real-time" interaction with other static materials, and "real-time" interactivity with integrated management system.

Open and Distance Learning for Sustainable Development in Myanmar

(a) Instructional Development

Open and distance learning has been used to deliver instruction in just about all subject areas and disciplines. Instructional development essentially involves definition, design, development, and dissemination. However, in terms of instructional development and design, some subject areas pose specific practical or pedagogical problems that need to be considered.

The three different delivery systems commonly used are the printed study guide, the interactive videoconference, and asynchronous learning using the Internet and World Wide Web.

Accessibility to e-Education in Myanmar

To provide ample learning opportunities, 619 e-Education Learning Centres have been established that make use of Information Technology. Multimedia Resource Centres and Language Laboratories have also been established at high schools and also at universities, degree colleges and colleges.

The Universities of Distance Education are utilizing the e-Education Learning Centres for students to view lectures telecast by the Yangon University of Distance Education Studio using electronic data broadcasting system via satellite. Satellite Data Broadcasting System has been launched to broadcast and teach educational programmes to facilitate learning regardless of place and time.

In addition, in order to provide the essential communications infrastructure required for countrywide education, the MOE has established an education intranet system using the

VSAT Technology, linking universities, degree colleges, colleges, departments and the offices of the MOE

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Curriculum Development

Curriculum development, including the syllabus for each course study, is worked up by the respective Board of Studies of each discipline. This Board of Studies also acts as Academic Assessors on academic standards. The curriculum and syllabus are periodically reviewed, particularly the syllabus for each course work. The review is made to keep up with the changing times and also to fulfill the national objectives.

Introducing Online Learning Programmes

Based on available support data broadcasting system, facilities, materials, potential experts, instructors and administration staff etc., the present 3rd generation distance learning programmes will be strengthened and reinforced to interface with the 4th generation online learning programmes. To be an effective organ "quality channel" distance learning programme, the interfacing will be generated by using the online courses such as - an instructor-led course study, which is similar to the traditional course study, an instructor-facilitated course study, i.e., to learn at one's own pace but guided by a course-guide, a self-paced course study, i.e., where a student works a complete independent study on his own according to structured course study.

(b) Student Perspectives

In designing a distance-learning programme, a profile of the students to be served should be developed. Demographic, motivational, academic preparedness, and access to resources are important. Another important is the evaluation, which should be data collected on student performance, participation, and satisfaction with their distance learning programmes.

Technology can provide learning alternatives for traditionally "disadvantaged" students. Moreover students learn more when they collaborate with others. Students' use of the Internet for search purposes will enhance self-directed learning. Student groups at different sites need to be as active participants, thus having an interactive nature.

Student Status in Distance Education Universities in Myanmar

Distance Education Universities in Myanmar absorb about 75% of the matriculated each year. All bona fide registered citizens of Myanmar are admitted. No discrimination is made to gender, creed, race and religion. within a set of criteria set by the Higher Education Department, the students can take up any course study they choose. However, in the science disciplines there is a limit for the intake, due to the constraints of laboratory facilities. No ceiling is ear-marked in the admission of students for a degree course. The enrolled students go through the process-controlled modes where their individual values and identity are respected by the academic and administrative staff.

(c) Faculty Perspectives

The effectiveness of online learning is based on the role of the professional teacher. They involve themselves in the use of new technologies to develop various instructional

strategies and resources for their students. For faculty to use distance learning effectively, training and development is a necessity. Various techniques have been used in training faculty members to use distance learning. Hands-on activities and access to equipment and facilities are also required for developing familiarity with distance learning technologies.

Staff Development in Myanmar

On the context of academic staff, each Department of Yangon University of Distance Education (YUDE) sees that the new recruits and other staff members are upgraded and strengthened with newer up-to-date subject matter and other general knowledge. Training in the form of workshops and seminars are carried out. These trainings and seminars do effectively improve the quality of the staff members to become professional teachers. One area of the staff development programme in YUDE is to allow staff members for the pursuit of the PhD courses at the University of Yangon.

(d) Administrative Support Services and Facilities

Most successful education programmes depend on administrators who are constructionists rather than conservatives. These power control people plan out new educational programmes. They are decision makers and referees. They should work closely with technical and support service personnel, ensuring that technological resources are effectively and efficiently deployed.

To be successful, all instructional programmes depend on a number of services for support. Libraries, media centers, and electronic multimedia rooms (computers, laboratories, etc.) directly contribute to the academic experiences of students. Registrars, counsellors, technicians likewise provide behind-the-scenes support. These support services are in fact important, since distance learning relies more on advanced technologies and facilities, competent and reliable technical support services.

Existing Problems

The MOE needs to equip schools with more up to date computers. At some learning centers, since the availability of these computers is still relatively small, and in such cases the use of computers is limited for the computer operation and data transfer. In addition, although the facilities are open, most students fail to engage themselves in some learning centers. Even though the use of Internet is becoming familiar to more and more students, the cost is still quite high. Another problem still exists; that is, the availability of meaningful and substantive online learning materials.

Suggestions

Suggestions for planning and organizing in sustainable development of open and distance learning program include:

- To train faculty members in developing learning materials;
- To develop computer-delivered instructional lab environments;
- To train instructors in managing their students in the teaching/learning activities using the advanced technologies;
- To monitor the progress of using Internet/Intranet for learning;
- To evaluate the effectiveness in the use of Internet/Intranet for distance education teaching/learning courses;

- To develop e-education governance for designing the system of utilizing new technology for learning, establishing the management teams, assisting in developing LANs;
- To develop a plan for any technology failure;
- To strengthen and reinforce with more up-to-date personal computers and other hardware and high speed modems;
- Online distance education programmes should be catered to any one who has a well equipped PCs and high speed modems, to inform and disseminate knowledge; and
- To create a "higher quality" learning environment.

Conclusion

The use of technology is believed to enhance teaching and learning by giving opportunities for visual representations and active participation. However, technology needs to be utilized in courses and blended with appropriate instructional strategies along with a good planning stage. Thus, investments in infrastructure enhancing distance education are needed; first to ensure equity among students, and second, to establish learning communities worldwide.

With the introduction of the electronic data broadcasting system and the establishment of the VSAT network in the country, Myanmar education is now in the mainstream of e-Education and it is well prepared for developing application programmes for online delivery system of the education sector. The evenly balanced functional and effective process mechanisms implemented by open and distance learning as well as reinforced and strengthened by the e-education programmes, have indeed created and generated sustainable development in the building capacity resources of the nation.

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