

Distance Education in Small Island Nations

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INTRODUCTION

Small island nations, especially Maldives, encounter a number of limitations in providing services to their people due to their size. These services include education, health, communications, and many other public services. These island nations consist of very small islands with a very low population density on most islands. The low population density on the islands limits the infrastructure developments mainly due to the lack of the economies of scale. For example, building a secondary school on an island with a population of less than 500 people does not provide economies of scale, but rather makes it economically a wastage of resources. An island this size would not have an adequate number of students per teacher, and particularly in developing countries, the public expenditure budget is so much deflated that this cannot be considered an alternative. Distance education is seen as an appealing alternative to traditional face-to-face education in these countries as it can provide education from a central location without having to spend a lot in developing infrastructure on several islands. Although it is easier to achieve economies of scale through distance-mode delivery of education, this alternative poses additional barriers that need to be addressed prior to establishing a distance-mode education system. This chapter looks at these barriers and describes a distance education model that addresses most of these barriers.

BACKGROUND

Distance education provides formal education where the instructors and learners are physically separated and interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors (Schlosser & Simonson, 2002). Distance education has traditionally been used to provide public education about agriculture,

health, literacy, and basic education mainly for the adult population (Perraton, 2000). However, distance education usage in higher education is rapidly growing all over the world. The development of open universities in 25 developing countries has been a major achievement in this growth during the last 20 years (Perraton, 2000). However, these institutions depend on distance education models developed and tested elsewhere, making it alien to themselves (Koul, 1995).

As aforementioned, small island nations face many barriers due to their small population sizes. There have been some efforts among different island nations to join forces in order to achieve economic viability. For example, the University of South Pacific (USP) and University of West Indies (UWI) are attempting to address broader regional needs rather than just the national needs. USP has three campuses located in Fiji, Vanuatu, and Samoa, and national facilities in 12 other countries (University of South Pacific, Online). University of South Pacific uses satellite links between these campuses and national facilities. Although the network is heavily used for administrative purposes, it is also used regularly for regional tutorials. The technology allows staff-to-staff communication and staff-to-student communication across different campuses (Perraton, 2000). Distance programmes are taught using locally developed print-based materials supported by a range of other media and resources. Tutorial support is provided for these programmes both in face-to-face contact as well as via technology. Frequently, audiotapes are used to complement the programmes as well as videotapes on occasional instances. All the programmes get support from the human network of full- or part-time staff widely dispersed in the local centres. All these services are centrally coordinated at University Extension (Matthewson & Va'a, 1999).

The University of West Indies was established in 1948 to cater to the English-speaking population in the Caribbean. It was formed as a college in collabora-

tion with the University of London at Mona, Jamaica (Brandon, 1999). The university consists of three campuses located in Mona (Jamaica), St. Augustine (Trinidad and Tobago), and Cave Hill (Barbados). In addition, there are 12 non-campus countries for which the university runs distance courses. The distance education programme at UWI began in 1983 under the name University of West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment (UWIDITE). Since then, UWI began experimenting with the use of telecommunications to deliver courses to off-campus students through UWIDITE (Perraton, 2000). Satellite links were established between campuses and off-campus centres. However, technical weaknesses as well as managerial difficulties led to UWIDITE exploring new potentials. UWI lags behind USP in integrating its distance education programme with other activities.

The regional models used by both USP and UWI are only applicable to small island nations where neighbouring nations are also small island nations. Even with these collaborations, the host countries dominate and the countries with less resources suffer as a consequence. This disparity will be higher when small island nations are situated alongside huge countries where total control will be taken by the larger power players, making this sort of collaboration impossible. Maldives is a prime example of a small island nation with less than 300 thousand people surrounded by countries having millions and billions of people. Hence, these nations have to seek alternative models. The following section looks at the barriers faced by Maldives in providing distance education to the outer islands.

Barriers for Small Island Nations: The Example of Maldives

Maldives is a prime example of a small island nation facing a number of barriers due to size and economic status. As it is not economically feasible to build a secondary school and high school on each of the islands, one of the ways to achieve economies of scale is to have regional centres where the students travel to on a daily basis to get their education. However, the absence of regular ferries between the islands in Maldives makes it impossible for students to travel to the regional centre on a daily basis if the centre is not situated on their own island. For this alternative to work, Maldives needs to invest heavily on establishing regular ferry services between the islands in addition to human resources de-

velopment and other infrastructure-development costs. Alternatively, boarding houses can be established on the islands where the regional schools are located, and students can reside in these houses during the school term, which again, requires huge financial investments. This leads to the alternative of reaching the students wherever they are through distance mode. Hence, a study into the best technology and delivery systems in Maldivian context was carried out.

Choice of Technology and Delivery Systems

The advent of advanced learning technologies has seen distance education moving from the individualised correspondence model to a more interactive mode. The use of different technologies and modes of instruction can be described using the dimensions described by Aggarwal and Bento (2000) to classify teaching environments. They use time and place to classify four major types of teaching environments. These four types can be used in categorising the technology used in delivery systems for distance education. The four types of instruction are same time, same place; anytime, same place; same time, anyplace; and anytime, anyplace. A similar approach has been used in this research to identify the best media technology suited to deliver instruction in Maldives.

The first category, same time, same place, represents traditional face-to-face classrooms where students attend classes at the same time for instruction (Aggarwal and Bento, 2000). This category of delivery systems is not feasible in Maldives and is the major rationale behind this research. Maldives is unable to build schools on each of the islands to deliver secondary education using traditional face-to-face classrooms.

Anytime, same place is where students attend study centres and labs to interact with teachers and other students. Major distance education providers like the British Open University use local study centres to support students by means of tutor support, library facilities, and other interactions (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996). The Bangladesh Open University (BOU) uses tutorial centres to deliver tutorials to the students on a fortnightly basis (BOU, n.d.; Rumble, 1999). As mentioned earlier, this alternative is not feasible as there are no regular ferry services between the islands, hence students will not be able to travel to regional centres for regular tutorials or classes. However, people travel between islands

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