The education of adults at a distance: an Asian perspective

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At present, one of the concepts which has the greatest influence on the provision of adult education is that of 'life-long education'. According to this concept, education is not only an important factor in the lives of individuals but also an activity in which man is constantly involved from birth to death. Education, along this line of thinking, is intended to respond to the needs of society and the aspirations of individuals, regardless of age, sex and background. In the past, various countries in Asia have tried to extend educational opportunities to adults by setting up schools exclusively for them and utilizing existing educational establishments to provide instruction as an extra activity outside normal class hours. At the tertiary level, various institutions of higher education would provide evening classes for external students with a view to broadening adult access to education. In most cases, adult students would still have to travel to attend classes at educational institutions. In some countries, however, the adoption of external studies systems has opened up a widened new world of fulfilment for adults, who can undertake tertiary studies at a distance whilst continuing their normal occupations. Australia and New Zealand are the main examples.

In the past decade, many countries in Asia have extended the range of opportunities for the education of adults by adopting the open education system and setting up, for this purpose, higher educational institutions of distance learning. Pakistan's Allama Iqbal Open University, Sri Lanka's Institute of Distance Education, China's Central Broadcasting and TV University, Australia's Deakin University, Japan's Broadcasting University and Thailand's Sukhothaithammathirat Open University (referred to as STOU hereafter), all these institutions of distance learning, despite their individual characteristics, do indeed have one aim in common: to serve the needs of adults seeking to upgrade professional qualifications and/or to acquire a real understanding of the subjects chosen. At present, a large number of countries in Asia, especially those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, have expressed a great interest in providing adult
education through distance-learning systems. It is to be expected that distance-learning institutions similar to those under review will be established in many countries in the near future.

In view of the fact that the author represents an institution of distance learning whose status has just changed from that of 'intending doer' to that of 'beginner', it seems appropriate that he confine himself to presenting such problems as have emerged from the limited scope of experience acquired so far. Altogether there are some six critical problems to be highlighted.

The first one is: why is it necessary to provide adult education through the distance-learning system?

In developing countries, opportunities for education in the traditional system are somewhat limited. Since the level of economic and social development of a society is closely related to its stock of values, attitudes, knowledge and skills, both productive and social, it is essential to have a teaching mode that will enable a vast majority of working people to have access to education on a more extensive and egalitarian basis without having to stay away from their jobs to attend classes. The distance-learning system can thus be seen as an effective and economical means of extending educational opportunities.

The second point is: for whom is the distance learning intended?

Developing countries in Asia have to try to satisfy the rapidly increasing demands for education of both adults and secondary school-leavers. The establishment of an Open University will serve two main purposes: to enable adults to undertake university studies, and to ensure the availability of places for young adults fresh from secondary school. For an open university such as STOU, to provide educational services for these two target populations - so diverse in maturity, background, lifestyle and motivation - by means of the same teaching mode will inevitably constitute a complex problem. Whereas the occupational groups are content with an external studies system that allows them to continue their normal occupations, the young adult groups, having been accustomed to face-to-face teaching and being still unemployed, would naturally prefer to be internal students in conventional universities. If it were possible to make a choice free of any kind of political pressure it would greatly facilitate the operation of an Open University to have an intake of working adults only. However, if no alternative were made available, what would happen as a result?

The third point is: how are we to set up an appropriate distance-learning system?
At the beginning of our project, we tried to look for a satisfactory blueprint or a successful precedent to follow by studying the development and achievements of such universities as the U.K. Open University and learning from their long experience in teaching at a distance. After several study and observation tours to various regions of the world, we have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to adopt and imitate any existing model, and that each institution must devise its own distinctive system well-suited to the socio-economic environment of the country.

In developing countries, mass communication technology has not as yet attained the desirable degree of progress. As the use of radio and television in particular is still limited, greater reliance has to be placed on correspondence methods than on other media. Since local educational services are scarce and not easily accessible, it is necessary to supplement independent learning with the provision of a greater number of tutorials and opportunities for travelling staff/student contacts.

Another problem relates to publications in foreign languages such as English. As the mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction in many countries, it is virtually impossible to make use of the existing teaching materials in conjunction with other open universities in developed countries. Hence, there is an increase in the responsibilities that must be borne. Admittedly, this problem can partly be solved by translations. But, on the whole, the production and development of self-instructional materials will still have to be undertaken. As far as the exchange of teaching materials among distance-learning institutions is concerned, possibilities of realization are somewhat limited. What can readily be achieved instead is in the field of technical know-how rather than in that of teaching materials.

The fourth point is: how are we to maintain high-quality teaching and prevent a lowering of standards?

Many academics, especially those of conventional universities, and employers, who have been accustomed to the traditional educational practice, tend to doubt whether it is possible to teach at a distance effectively, and claim that the distance-learning system is likely to turn out graduates of lower quality than those produced by conventional universities. It is true that some open universities such as the U.K. Open University have proved that it is possible to provide education of high quality similar to that of conventional universities. In developing countries, however, an open university has to face constraints of various kinds, such as those previously mentioned. The question is how to convince the public of the effectiveness of teaching at a distance and to win respectability for such a new venture rapidly?
The fifth point is: how are we to avoid wastage without producing an overabundance of graduates, or how can we avoid the wastage vs. surplus dilemma?

The dilemma faced by most open universities is that, on the one hand, there is a high drop-out rate and that, on the other, there is a surplus of graduates, exceeding the demand for them. Educational economists tend to criticize investment in distance teaching by pointing out that the wastage rate in open universities is higher than in conventional universities. At the same time, if open universities can teach effectively, there is a concomitant fear that there will be an overabundance of graduates, because the intake of students will be greater than that at conventional institutions of higher education. On the other hand, if a university is really open in the full sense of the word, then the opportunities for education offered to the community at large will be unlimited. So how is one to strike a balance between social demand and manpower requirements?

The sixth and last point is: what is the key to success?

The provision of adult education through the distance-learning system owes its success or failure to the personnel available, especially academic staff. In developing countries, there is already a shortage of well-qualified staff in conventional universities. With the establishment of another university, the staff shortage problem becomes more serious and selection even more restricted. In the case of an open university, even if the greatest care has been taken in recruiting really well-qualified staff, there is still the problem of re-orientating them from the traditional educational practice with which they have been acquainted. Indeed, it is a most difficult task to transform them into enthusiasts for and experts in the new system. It is not an exaggeration to say that distance learning has revolutionized higher education, which used to be considered as a 'sacred rite practised behind closed doors' for centuries. Academics involved in the distance-learning system will therefore be required to have exceptional courage and skills. One of the most important tasks that an open university in developing countries has to undertake from the outset is that of creating new attitudes and values. In other words, academics should undergo a kind of conversion of the soul to become a new breed of academics favourably disposed to the distance-learning system. Such a task is indeed most strenuous and demanding.

If the development of personnel is the key to success, then cooperation among institutions of distance learning should be in the form of sharing resources and expertise so as to enrich the teaching staff's knowledge and experience, and provide them with new technical know-how. This is something on which great
emphasis should be placed. To have high-quality distance-learning teachers is undoubtedly the key to success.

The author would like to conclude by stating that the distance-learning system is an innovation that will facilitate the democratization of the adult education process. It is easy to say this, but difficult to put it into practice. Nevertheless, hard as it may seem, you all will agree that it is both a mission that we have to accomplish and a challenge that we have to accept. Is it not?

Let us keep the lamp of distance-learning burning!