

Taking the Mountain to Mohammed: Distance Education for All

Aggrey Brown

*Caribbean Institute of Media and Communications (CARIMAC),
the University of the West Indies, Mona campus*

Abstract

Small states are not homogeneous, even though there is a tendency to think of them as being so. Indeed, the very concept of small is relative and therefore not very helpful analytically. This paper argues that when applied to distance education, smallness (however defined) is not always a disadvantage. The particular mix of technologies and methodologies required for effective distance education programmes in such states will be influenced by factors such as population size, i.e. demand, geography and topography, the objectives of distance education programmes, infrastructure and other available resources. While cutting edge media technologies open up enormous global possibilities for the University of the West Indies as a service provider in the area of distance education, the development of appropriate distance education strategies should be informed in the first instance by the socioeconomic and cultural reality of the Caribbean and only secondarily by such cutting edge technologies. Failure to order our priorities accordingly can result in the wasting of scarce resources and a widening of the knowledge gap between a small elite and the majority of the region's citizens.

The Big Problem of Smallness

Any discussion of distance education in small states must begin with the obvious observation that small, as a defining concept, is at best vague and at worst useless. Small is a relational concept that only has meaning with respect to something else. Therefore, what is important in defining small is not the thing itself that may be considered small but that which it is being measured against. In clarifying what is to be understood by "small states", various referents or criteria can be used to make sense of the notion of smallness. Moreover, whether one uses a single criterion or a combination of referents to define the "small state" will certainly influence what distance education strategies are pursued in such contexts.

The geographic size of CARICOM states is invariably used as a referent for defining size. However, by itself, geography is not very helpful as a relational concept. By this referent, Montserrat, the smallest CARICOM member state at 104 sq km,¹ is small in comparison to Barbados, which is four times as large at 430 sq km. However, at 10,992 sq km, Jamaica is 25 times the size of Barbados, which would lead to the conclusion that Jamaica is "large". On the other hand, Guyana, geographically the largest CARICOM member state at 214,970 sq km, is 19 times the size of Jamaica, which, by comparison would then be considered small. Geographic size as a referent also ignores the topographical aspects of the examples cited above. Though in terms of physical

size, Montserrat is four times smaller than Barbados, topographically it is a mountainous country compared to Barbados, which is relatively flat - the highest point on that island being just over 200 m. The Blue Mountain range of Jamaica, itself a mountainous country, peaks at nearly 3000 m, which would make Montserrat merely hilly and Barbados a virtual plain. By itself then, geography as a referent for defining smallness is inadequate.

Another referent that is commonly used to define small is population size. But this too is misleading. Guyana, which is almost 40 times the size of Trinidad and Tobago, has a population of 710,000. At 1,234,388, Trinidad's population is almost twice the size of Guyana's. And at 2,414,100, Jamaica's population is twice the size of Trinidad's and almost four times bigger than Guyana's. But that is not all, for even if population size is used as a referent to define size, gross numbers ignore other important demographic factors such as age, gender and population distribution. Montserrat before the eruption of the Soufriere volcano had a population of 12,467, concentrated primarily in the capital, Plymouth. Today, as a result of the volcano, the population is less than half its original size and all concentrated in the north of the island. Citizens are virtually within walking distance of each other. Indeed, it is true to say that in all CARICOM countries there is a heavy concentration of the national population in the capital cities. But it is also true that in most territories there is also a widely dispersed rural population.

When gross national product (GNP) per capita is used as a referent for defining smallness, the concept of smallness still remains clouded. Barbados, with a population a third the size of Guyana's, has a GNP per capita of \$6,540, almost 20 times the size of Guyana's per capita GNP, which stands at \$330. Yet, geographically, Barbados would sit comfortably in the mouth of the

Essequibo River. More significantly, GNP per capita as a referent is misleading since it too reveals nothing of income distribution.

The point is that by themselves, none of these referents is sufficient to define smallness for purposes of determining useful distance education strategies. Indeed, smallness is a quite misleading and therefore unhelpful, if not useless, strategic concept for such a purpose. The concept is misleading because, among other things, it implies a degree of homogeneity of states, which, from the above examples, clearly does not exist in the Caribbean.

For a variety of reasons then, very little or no emphasis should be placed on size when considering appropriate distance education strategies in the Caribbean. Of far more importance are: the purposes or goals of distance education initiatives; the general context within which distance education is pursued and the appropriateness of extant technologies. Furthermore, while none of the referents discussed above is pertinent to the definition of smallness, taken together, they are all relevant to establishing the need for, as well as the context of, distance education initiatives.

Unlocking the Potential of an Elite

The contemporary emphasis on distance education globally is technology-driven and derives from the revolutionary developments of electronic media as well as widespread access to a variety of such media. But distance education is not a new phenomenon. From early in the twentieth century, various institutions of higher learning have used printed materials delivered by mail to make their services available to those who were physically distant. One well-known British institution offering such a service to Caribbean nationals from the 1940s was Woolsey Hall,

Oxford, which made its services available through structured “correspondence courses”. In the absence of a regional Caribbean university, many Caribbean nationals pursued university degree courses and programmes by correspondence with this service provider.

However, there were two significant limitations of early distance education initiatives. The first was that speed and efficiency were constrained by the mode of delivery. Postal services were both slow and unreliable and therefore affected the quality of interaction between tutors and clients. The second was more insidious and socially significant. The medium of delivery excluded all but the literate from participating. In short, forced reliance on the print medium determined who the beneficiaries of distance education could and would be and hence, determined the purposes to be served by distance education initiatives. These two factors, and the linkage of universities to the mediated delivery of their services beyond the walls of academia, continue to influence significantly present trends in distance education in CARICOM.

Long after the initial technological limitations of access and accessibility have been overcome, the purposes being served by regional distance education continue to be narrowly defined. In spite of its mission to “unlock the potential of the people of the region”, the University of the West Indies distance teaching initiative continues to serve the needs of a small elite of the region’s people. In both its intramural and extramural efforts, a mere 5 percent of the eligible tertiary level population of the region is served by the UWI.

Education, conceived as an institutional practice (schooling), continues to determine the purposes of distance education within the region via the UWI. Little distinction is made between formal, nonformal and informal practices. Furthermore,

the technologies used by the institution to deliver its services remain exclusionary in their deployment, in spite of the fact that contemporary technologies can transcend time, distance, place and social barriers. Although information can be transmitted in real time, across any distance, anywhere and to anyone, it does not appear that these characteristics of contemporary media are used to determine either distance education policies or strategies within CARICOM. However, as other external and internal tertiary institutions increase the tempo of competition with the UWI for students, the regional university will have to rethink its distance education strategies if it is not to be left behind. Such rethinking will necessitate the strategic repositioning of the UWI vis-à-vis both internal and external competitors, as well as determining the appropriate mix of technologies that will allow it to deliver its services inclusively rather than exclusively.

Unlocking the Potential of All the People

The UWI’s decision to become a mixed mode institution confirms its awareness of the value of contemporary infocom technologies to extend its reach; to become a global service provider if it so desires. However, its choice of technologies unnecessarily limits its delivery capacity, as well as the range of its potential clients. Its choices also undermine the cost-effectiveness of its present programme.

As noted above, contemporary infocom technologies are time, distance and place insensitive. New media such as the Internet and World Wide Web are also interactive, which is to say that, unlike the traditional mass media, they are bona fide communication technologies. These media were already in their infancy when the UWI invested heavily in its present audio conferencing facilities. While the twenty-eight

distance education centres located in all the contributing territories do extend the institution's reach, they do so only in a limited way. The seventeenth-century idea of a university as a physical place catering to an elite continues to inform the UWI's conception of itself at the start of the twentieth century and at great cost to both itself and the people of the region.

Universities are quintessential information-based institutions which, in their original incarnation, catered to an elite. This was a necessary consequence of the fact that the information storage and delivery medium was the book – the written and more latterly, the printed, word. Therefore, only the literate could participate in information sharing and knowledge generation within academia. In spite of the evolution of information storage and transmitting technologies such as audio and video tape and more recently the computer, most universities remain text-based information and knowledge generating and transmitting institutions. In only a handful of cases, such as the Edith Cowan University of Australia, has a paradigm shift occurred in the way a university defines itself. Edith Cowan is a virtual institution that relies primarily on electronic media to deliver its services anywhere in the island continent or the world.

Beginning with the University of the West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment in the early 1980s to the present, the UWI's foray into distance education has been narrowly technology-led rather than purpose-driven. Putting the cart before the horse, the institution has sought, after the fact, to find a direction for both cart and horse. By cutting down on the costs of travel for administrative meetings and so on, linking the three campuses of the university may well have led to greater efficiencies in its overall operations.

Locating distance teaching centres in all the contributing territories has also clearly extended

the reach of the university. However, the experiment did not lead to any fundamental shift in how the university conducts its business. In order to gain access to its services, clients of the university still have to go somewhere, to a specific place called a University Centre to do so, largely because, conceptually, the university remains a location-specific physical place. In a number of the so-called “small states” of the Caribbean (eg. Dominica, St. Lucia and St. Vincent), going to University Centres is often achieved at great cost to the university's clients in time, energy and money. And in Trinidad and Tobago, the Bahamas and Belize, University Centres, located as they are in urban areas, remain out of reach of many potential rural clients.

The shift of orientation that the regional cultural context calls for is yet to be made by the university. That shift requires that the university delivers its services to its constituents where they are rather than have its constituents come to it for those services. In short, it necessitates taking the mountain to Mohammed.

Technological convergence (audiovisuals, telecoms and computer), in particular, the advent of the World Wide Web and the Internet, is leading to a rethinking of relationships between: people and people; people and institutions; institutions and institutions as well as institutions and people. However, with the rapidity of technological change in the infocom sector, caution is required when making policy; further, that the full range of available technologies be examined before deciding on any particular mix of technologies or course of action. Most importantly, sound policy requires being clear about the purposes to be served by the technologies of choice.

Even a cursory survey of available infocom media in the region will show the following in descending order of popular media consumption

among the region's 5 million citizens: (1) radio/audiotape, (2) television/videotape/cable, (3) print (newspapers/magazines/books), (4) telephone/fax, (5) multimedia (Nintendo™, Sega™, Gameboy™, etc.), (6) Internet/WWW.

Paradoxically, in seeking to unlock the potential of the Caribbean people, the UWI does not use radio, the most popular and ubiquitous medium and television, the second most popular and ubiquitous medium in the region, in its distance education initiatives. Instead, the least accessible, the Internet, is fast becoming a core technology for distance education. *The paradox exists because the distance teaching strategy has always been and continues to be technology-led rather than purpose-driven.*

The implications of continuing to pursue a distance education strategy that is technology-led are far reaching and complex. Specifically with respect to the Internet, while the technology provides an opportunity for the UWI to provide its services interactively and in real time globally, it will still be providing those services to an elite. For, in spite of its rapid growth worldwide, the Internet remains extraordinarily inaccessible to the vast majority of the world's people.

Relying as it does on telephones for interconnection, one only has to look at the distribution of telephones within CARICOM to see that the Internet has a long way to go before it can be considered a popular medium within the region. (No country in CARICOM has yet achieved even a 40:100 per capita telephone line distribution, let alone universal service.) The real financial costs of Internet access to individuals (computer, modem, telephone) are also a factor mitigating against its widespread deployment within the region. For the foreseeable future then, an Internet based distance education strategy is technologically inappropriate and will, inevitably,

only widen the gap between the university and its potential clients: the very opposite of what such a strategy should seek to achieve.

The case for a distance education strategy that uses radio as a core technology in a mix of technologies is overwhelming.

In countries where literacy levels are high, continued sole reliance on text-based information by universities may not be as socially negative as in situations such as CARICOM where literacy levels range from a high of over 90 percent in Barbados to a low of just over 50 percent in Jamaica. One obvious consequence of variable levels of literacy in the region therefore, is differential access to formal tertiary level education. And here, the emphasis is on "formal". For while the UWI's primary constituents are those citizens with the requisite matriculation requirements, it also has a direct and indirect responsibility to and for those who do not meet such requirements. Recognizing this, it is noteworthy that the Radio Education Unit was one of the first divisions of the Extra Mural Department of the UWI. Fifty years later, it still continues to perform its original function in the same way.

One of the strengths of contemporary broadcast radio is its reach and hence its ubiquity. However, its greatest attribute as a distance teaching technology is its mobility. From the farmer in the field to the motorist in a traffic jam, radio is everywhere and everyone has one. Comparatively, radio is also an inexpensive technology that permits time-shifting via tape recording. No other medium extant has this combination of characteristics. While television adds a visual dimension to the mediated experience, it is relatively expensive and lacks the mobility of radio.

Formal courses, delivered by radio and tailored to specific clients in different day parts, would take

the services of the university to people in the region wherever they are. Territorial size would be irrelevant, since the university would be a more amorphous and less logo-centric institution, serving its clients at their convenience. It would be as ubiquitous as the technology that it uses to deliver its services. In short, it would be in every nook and cranny of the region.

An indirect spin-off of using radio as a core technology in distance education in the region is that more people would benefit from the information and knowledge made available through the medium, not just those who would be formally registered as students with the institution. Any university programme broadcast, whether formal, nonformal or informal, could be listened to by anyone choosing to listen to it, including the illiterate. The benefits of this would be incalculable, since the university would be a constant presence in the consciousness of the region's people. Its academic and cultural influence would transcend the barriers that presently exist as a result of differential access of citizens to the institution. The goodwill generated by such vicarious access in this manner would itself be incalculable.

Reliance on radio as a core technology of its distance teaching initiatives would also make the university more competitive within the environment in which it is increasingly being challenged by foreign institutions. Indeed, the challenges being mounted by foreign universities are based primarily on distance teaching methodologies. As of this writing none of these

institutions is using radio as a delivery medium, although a number of them have the capacity to do so. With the liberalization of the broadcasting environment throughout the region, a significant market niche exists for education content. And it is a niche that will be filled sooner rather than later by somebody.

Given its experience with audioconferencing technologies, at a very practical level, introducing radio in distance education by the UWI would be relatively straightforward, since the principles of preparing subject matter for radio broadcast are essentially the same. The lecture format is also more easily adapted to audio than it is to any other medium.

Finally, while the case is being made for radio as the core technology in the UWI's distance teaching initiatives, it is not being suggested that it be the only technology. As with all successful distance education programmes, a mix of technologies is always required for maximum benefit. However, what the appropriate mix should be will be influenced by factors such as the nature of the subject matter, who the clients are and the defined goals and objectives of any programme. Ultimately, the most successful distance education programmes are purpose-driven, not technology-led.

Note

1. All country statistics from *Caricom Perspective* 61/62, July-December, 1993.