

**Dystopia to Utopia and Beyond:  
A Case for Distance Education (DE) in Small States**

***Badri N. Koul***

*Director, the University of the West Indies  
Distance Education Centre, Cave Hill, Barbados*

**Abstract**

Political favour for, and cost-effectiveness of, distance education (DE) has introduced it everywhere, including small countries, which find it difficult not only to justify it, but also to assimilate it within their traditional educational systems. Consequently, though they would like to, they do not manage to exploit the full potential of the DE methodologies at the actual operational level, whatever the technology. This paper presents a critique of the UWI distance education operations, both in terms of their history and what obtains today. Following on that, it outlines the present environment and proposes a *utopia* of distance education for the anglophone Caribbean. So long as the proposal remains on paper it remains a utopia. Transforming it into a reality demands imagination and action!

No two countries have introduced distance education (DE) necessarily for one and the same reason. The UK Open University was established to provide a second chance to those who had, for whatever reasons, missed their first; Fern Universitate in Germany introduced DE to counter falling registrations in higher education; while in India the major arguments were economic, the need for mass education and the tyranny of distances.

Generally, persuaded by its significant features of economy, conquest of distances and mass application, states in the developing world favour it as the ultimate solution to their educational problems. Seemingly, in contrast with the case of large states, small states with small populations, short distances and the tendency of reaching saturation levels in short

periods of time cannot justify adopting DE on those very grounds. The explanation for the rise of DE in such states may variously be attributed to the glamour of going with the slogan and jumping onto the bandwagon, falling in line with the directives of funding agencies that tag DE components to their educational projects or, as in certain cases, to some situationally relevant arguments. It is therefore not unusual for most of the small states engaged in DE to question the rationality of their decisions and/or activities at one or the other stage in the process. At times the authorities themselves raise these questions, and then there are field operators within the system who raise them and in many cases, convinced of the defiling role of DE, even work for sabotaging it. This is what may be termed the state of DYSTOPIA. Obviously, we are still in need of a

strong and robust argument for DE in small states, so that once introduced it is not stifled but exploited proactively to its full potential.

It is true that, as in countries like India, small states cannot reap economies of scale in their DE operations, equally valid is the point that distances are no real problem in such places, nor is mass education such a burning issue as it may be in places like Indonesia, Bangladesh, Brazil or Egypt. Notwithstanding the apparent inapplicability of these classical arguments in their case, small states do need DE in no uncertain way.

As has been said, we never know what a newborn baby will do and achieve, so with an innovation! The classical arguments had their best currency in the late '60s and '70s, and hold good for large countries even today. In the mean time, however, the educational environment has changed significantly, mainly due to advances in communication technologies and partly due to a better understanding of educational transactions, and the classical arguments for DE have manifested in new forms and on new grounds. Economies of scale through DE operations have become relevant for all, including small countries, in view of the possibilities of collaborations among different institutions from different countries, different institutions within the same country and among different faculties and/or modes within the same institution. The issue of distance is no longer seen only in terms of hundreds and thousands of miles, instead it is now conceived in terms of the ease and the time one may take in transferring information, volumes of text/data, voice and/or images from one point to the other, be it across oceans and mountains or within the boundaries of one and the same town or building. And the size of the population in need of education may not be seen in terms of

the gross numbers and the institutional registrations only. Contrasting with the percentage of students, in the relevant age group, engaged in higher education in advanced countries, developing countries show dismal statistics. Roughly, anywhere between 96 percent and 84 percent of the aspiring young populations in the latter have no access to higher education. The classical arguments for DE do stand in the case of small states too.

In addition, DE practices over the past three decades have shown the possibilities of its pervasive influence, its flexibility for customizing education for varied student needs and dovetailing with face-to-face teaching, its potential for promoting equity in educational dispensation and penetrating conservative cultural environs in the process of educational globalization and its responsiveness, as well as sensitivity, toward technological advances to the extent that it is seen as *the* mode of the next century. Small states can neither avoid it, nor do without it.

Evening and part-time teaching-learning transactions can, in most cases, be assimilated within DE operations, overcrowded classes can be rationalized by shifting part of the transaction to DE operations and shortage of qualified teachers, space and lack of equipment can be mitigated to a great extent by adopting DE as a regular component of any educational system anywhere. By incorporating DE techniques into the existing training programmes, institutional contribution of ace trainers can be enhanced substantially, and larger numbers of trainees catered to in a given period of time. Teachers at all levels can have more time for their research work and greater effort and attention can be given to highlighting and incorporating local and culture specific components within the existing curricula. At this point in time it

should not be difficult to visualize a new educational culture, exemplified by the emergence of the new learner and virtual universities/schools, which is too pervasive to be contained by nostalgia, turning a blind eye to the happenings around us or the conventional norms that govern higher education today.

The foregoing exposition points to the fact that whether the states are small or large, DE has to be allowed (and it is taking) its due place in today's educational enterprise. The states that have introduced it are better off, whether or not they have fully realized the value of their venture. The problem, as we have tried to show, is not with the WHY of it. It is the HOW of it that turns things upside down, a UTOPIA into a DYSTOPIA, and brings all the doubts and hesitations against it to the fore. Here is a case to put the point across.

A well-established institution takes a well-intentioned decision to go dual mode, thus laying the foundation of a UTOPIA.

1. It is assumed that 20 percent of the allotted institutional time is not utilized by the Faculty, and that this spare capacity would be devoted to DE operations in each and every faculty.
2. It is assumed that the academic as well as the administrative fraternities of the institution would accept and assimilate the top-down decision and its implications for their work norms and collective output.
3. It is also assumed that DE operations would be seen as the routine institutional activities at all the places which function as the interface between the institution and the student body.
4. It is assumed that the rules and regulations

currently in operation for the face-to-face students would more than suffice for the DE students, and so they are treated as the part-time students of the institution.

5. It is decided that the faculties concerned would drive the system and the existing administrative provision would suffice to manage the additional DE student registrations, examinations and certification.
6. It is decided that funds would be allocated to every major unit of the institution to carry out the DE mandate efficiently and effectively.
7. Deputy deans for each faculty, programme coordinators, course coordinators and in certain cases assistant registrars for outreach purposes are designated to manage the academic and administrative activities generated by the system.
8. A loan is taken to upgrade the existing communication network, train the academic and other personnel for taking up assignments emerging from the DE initiatives. Part of the borrowed money is allocated to the related civil works and the preparation of DE study materials.
9. For purposes of policy formulation, implementation and overall monitoring of the system, a new board also is created.
10. Specialist human resources in the persons of curriculum development specialists, editors, production assistants, technicians and communication personnel are put in place to perform specialist functions within the system.
11. Procedures for appointing local tutors are spelled out and remuneration schemes outlined to pay for various services.
12. Even a marketing officer is appointed to market the products of the system.

13. Strategic plans are worked out; implementation schedules prepared and work started in earnest.
14. It is given to understand that in one's career advancement some weight will be given to one's work done for DE.
15. Thus every thing being in place, courses are advertised and students registered, all hoping for all the best.

All the sails set and the prow pointing to the destination, the cracks start leaking as soon as the first waves hit the vessel.

1. In general, the Faculty do not subscribe to the wishful assumption that they leave 20 percent of their institutional time unutilized, consequent upon which, they find no time to give to DE operations. They would, however, work for DE in their own time, provided they are paid for it.
2. The purport of the decisions taken and their implications have not been internalized uniformly across the units; if otherwise, then they have not been accepted by each and every department. There are units, big and small, which count DE work as *additional*, and would like to be paid for it over and above their normal salaries. And some units are actually paid for this so-called additional work. Some of the administrators do not count the DE students as those of the institution and treat them indifferently.
3. As at the institute itself, in many cases the staff, who interact with DE students on a regular basis at the local sites, also remain sore about the additional workload which the DE operations impose on them.
4. The rules and regulations currently in operation are those that have been framed, and are modified from time to time, for face-

to-face students. They are patently insensitive to the needs as well as the concerns of DE students who display a profile very different from that of day scholars. Their being adults with multiple commitments and anxieties is not an institutional concern, with the result that their learning experiences come to be bitter and frustrating.

5. Faculties too consider DE work as an add on, for which they have either no time, or must be paid separately. In certain cases, engrossed in watching a cricket match, a course coordinator will not hesitate to cancel a teleconference; another one will bulldoze a question paper with faulty instructions, and admonish the officials in-charge of the operations to mind their own business as the system is faculty-driven; and yet another one deems DE as an unbeatable competitor and so must oppose it tooth and nail.
6. Funds, of course, are provided to the major units, but because of the absence of a clear understanding regarding the costs in relation to the services to be rendered, each unit goes its own way not only in utilizing those funds, but also in assessing their adequacy or otherwise. Generally, the funds are seen as awfully inadequate.
7. Not every programme coordinator is genuinely interested in DE work; overwhelmed by their routine responsibilities, DE affairs slip down on their priority lists, consequent upon which crucial decisions get delayed, to the utter disgust of field workers and students, bringing a bad name to the institution which it can ill afford.
8. As the implementation of the loan-project is the responsibility of a temporary unit that

has scant regard for DE operations, expertise, personnel and their considered opinion, it should not be surprising to find the funds going to nonessentials while the essentials get starved. On top of that, if the implementation starts with no reference to any cost-benefit analysis whatsoever, it must face unusual ups and downs and may ultimately prove to be lop-sided.

9. An additional board to look after DE affairs, among other things, cannot function to its full potential if it has to do so either as a recommendatory or a subordinate body, subservient to other senior boards which have traditionally been governing the institutional affairs, are well recognized and well entrenched within the institutional ethos. Further, this fledgeling board cannot manage the plethora of activities generated by DE without creating appropriate mechanisms for that purpose which it has yet to put in place.
10. The task of the specialist personnel is immensely frustrating as the conventional classroom academic behaviour, partly on account of personal views and beliefs pertaining to good practices in teaching and partly because of a lack of commitment to DE, conflicts with the scientific instructional design which DE is based on. This conflict results in inordinate delays in course development and dispatches, and at times in aborted courses, sending both the specialists and the students helter-skelter in search of replacements which are not available in each and every case.
11. The system advocates local tutorials for each and every course without having any idea about the availability of adequately qualified people for all the possible levels and at all the local centres. The course packages (not being flexible in terms of their components) disorient students when a tutor is not available. Then, there are cases where local practices transgress the official regulations, creating anomalies such as paying tutors over and above what they should be paid under the institutional regulations.
12. The marketing officer's appointment proved to be premature. Since the institution did not have a reasonable body of products to offer, nor a realistic plan, followed by successful implementation for assured and timely supply of products, the position has become an unnecessary drag on resources.
13. The strategic plans supposed to guide the operations of DE at the institute are patently idealistic. As the assumptions that form the basis of these plans have proved to be unrealistic as well as incorrect, the plans have not gone beyond the drawing board. Consequently, no reasonable projections have been possible all along, nor can such projections be made unless the basic assumptions are reworked to be realistic.
14. Contrary to the assurances given from time to time, DE work, by way of course preparation, course coordination, etc., has yet to find a place in the scheme of career advancement at the institute. Consequent upon which, work for DE continues to be scoffed at. It is a situation neither tenable nor acceptable at dual mode institutions.
15. The case outlined in the above fourteen points results in problems for students registered for the various DE courses available under this dispensation:
  - Confusion with registration, selection of courses and award of exemptions;
  - Delayed and/or piecemeal supply of study materials, defective instructional

design in certain cases and confusion in assignment handling;

- Confusion in the organization of teleconferences, absenteeism among course coordinators, local tutors and students and indifference to learners' queries;
- Delayed appointment of tutors, non-availability of adequately qualified tutors and, in certain cases, demotivating size of tutorial groups;
- Confusion in the conduct of examinations, distribution of wrong question papers, loss of answer scripts, problems with remarking or review of answer scripts, inordinately delayed and lost results.

Of the above two sets of fifteen points each, the first shows how a UTOPIA may be conceived and put in place with the good intention that it would materialize itself, while the second set shows how and why it turns into a DYSTOPIA at the operational level. The obvious way out is to revisit the UTOPIA and assess its components in relation to the corresponding ones in the DYSTOPIA, rationalize and correct the assumptions, revise the decisions accordingly, lay out realistic plans with due attention to budgeting and funding and then implement them after their operational feasibility is assured on theoretical as well as practical grounds.

As the operations are mid-stream and must continue, this DYSTOPIA needs a multi-pronged corrective for its transformation.

Prong 1: A concerted effort has to be made to reduce the inconveniences that the students are facing in their day to day educational

transactions. This demands constant vigilance for academic as well as administrative misdemeanours and mishaps, and timely action for their redress and the needed overhaul; concerted and quick action to build up the necessary documentation, bringing home all the relevant rules and regulations and make them available to all the concerned; persistent effort to build and maintain contacts with the relevant personnel within faculties and administrative units so that correctives whenever needed can be implemented immediately; and identification of gaps, ambiguities, distortions and anomalies in the existing regulations and practices that cause frustrations and inconveniences so as to work for their removal and/or modification consistently and relentlessly.

This prescription is difficult but not impossible to materialize. It has to be materialized as it is the only way to keep the current operations from lapsing into a failure or coming to a grinding halt.

Prong 2: Work assiduously for bolstering the six major operations DE depends on - support services, course preparation, dispatch and distribution of materials, recruitment and training of tutors, accurate scheduling for teleconferences and top level functionality of the digital network. This will enhance and consolidate the good effects/results of the activities under prong 1.

Prong 3: Build up sustained bottom-up pressure for modifying the relevant rules and regulations together with the related practices, so that the total potential of DE as a system becomes realizable as half-hearted lip-service to the system is shunted out, fears and hesitations are ameliorated and rhetoric is replaced by genuine cooperative action. Such a proposal for modified legislation has implications for administrative

structures and work culture. It may necessitate transfer of responsibilities, rights and powers from one person and/or section to another and through a process of sharing they may need to be distributed appropriately. Titles/nomenclature of the existing positions may also need to be modified. Of course, these modifications have to be incorporated with the least possible changes in the present set up.

Prong 4: The above three stages cannot be materialized unless there is a thorough understanding of and reasonable handle on the budget and funds. No proposal or policy statement is worth its name unless it is supported by not only a matching budgetary allocation, but also the actual control on funds and fiscal flow. It is therefore necessary to develop a full understanding of the budgeting process, its content and structure and the sensitivities involved therein and then free it from unnecessary shackles, so that subordinate allocations can be rationalized, investments can be made where they are needed most and a desirable balance struck between the revenue earned through DE and the sums invested in it. The system needs to perform at a level of efficiency that returns at least 20 percent of its economic cost, if not more.

Prong 5: While continuing adherence to the currently used course package, it is time that attention was turned to online and Web-based course offerings, gradually but steadily and surely. The existing major hurdles in terms of the problem of access from the students' side are poised to be eliminated by means of the new net-appliances together with CDROM applications. These hold promises for resolving

problems pertaining to tutors, transportation of study materials and loss of time in transactions through conventional means. Plans have to be prepared to decide on and implement a judicious mix of the existing course components and what may be presented online and/or through disc-devices. Again, well planned investments have to be made on equipment, transfer of the required technology, related training for the personnel concerned and the procurement of new staff for the purpose.

Prong 6: The existing network has gaps in terms of its infrastructure, personnel and utility. These need to be identified accurately and filled as soon as possible.

Prong 7: The board has to come into its own - revisit and reiterate its responsibilities, establish mechanisms to fulfil them and establish its credentials at the right level of protocol, so that it may formulate policies and also implement them without losing time in looking for comments, which anyway may not be forthcoming.

The seven-pronged operation as outlined above will not only transform the existing DYSTOPIA into a UTOPIA, but also materialize it.

Small states need DE as much as the large and the advanced ones do. Difficulties, however, arise when the doubts and hesitations about the WHY of it get reflected in the HOW of it. Such a HOW is bound to be dysfunctional. Herein, we have seen that those doubts and hesitations are not justifiable and also that a dysfunctional HOW can be made functional.