

NOTE:

This case study has been used to inform Chapter 4 of the book,
Strategies for Sustainable Open and Distance Learning
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The case study has not been subjected to an editorial process.
The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the author.

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Technology as the panacea in education in general and in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in particular is a recurrent theme that in our experience, crops up again every 5-10 years on average among administrators and politicians. First came radio, then educational television and satellite-based education, then computer-assisted instruction, then Internet platforms. Each time the public was told that the enduring miracle of universal quality learning was finally accessible through the new medium that would make the previous modes of transmission obsolete.

Highly **sophisticated, distributed technology** of the kind that is being envisaged for distance education, calls for highly skilled, expensive staff and fully trained course designers.

Is it justified? Does it correspond to **students' actual expectations**? Does it in fact conceal the flaws in **the course design** and /or the absence of responsive, flexible **learner support**? Is it sustainable?

The three examples below took place over the last 30 years. They have brought to light some of the foreseeable and not so foreseeable pitfalls that may prevent the ODL process from taking off and operating smoothly. They are not failures in the sense that through further thinking and orientation the obstacles have been /are being removed, but sometimes at considerable human and financial cost.

They are presented in the light of the four factors mentioned above, namely:

- 1_ the **appropriateness of the technology**,
- 2_ the **identification of students' expectations**
- 3_ the **quality of the course design**
- 4_ the **presence/absence of real learner support**.

Example 1: Algeria.

After Independence in 1962, there was a strong emphasis on higher education with the creation of several new universities. This coincided in the mid 1970's with the boom in oil and gas prices which vastly increased the resources available to the government ministries.

The University of Constantine was designed as an architectural landmark and it was decided that it would be the nation's leading-edge centre in audio visual technology. Massive investment was made in studios, closed circuits, recording equipment and assorted broadcasting hardware which would amount to several millions of US dollars in today's money. By the time experts were called in and pedagogical conferences organized, it was too late to define a clear policy that would lead to the progressive build-up of a distance education system. The technology was becoming obsolescent and the elements that were still operational were progressively split up between the various Faculties where they often served as the basis for some interesting pedagogical initiatives to support and supplement traditional face-to-face instruction.

This was clearly a case where the decision-makers had been led into the purchase of **overwhelming, mass media-type technologies before paying attention to the potential learners' needs and expectations and to the vital *unglamorous* issues of course design and learner support.**

Example 2 :an Open University in an emerging country-the Bangladesh OU is a carefully designed attempt to respond to the vital educational needs of one of the poorest nations on earth by maximising access for the greater number of social groups and providing quality learning material at a cost compatible with the country's means. BOU is over ten years old and its overall design, management and planning of course delivery has benefited from the help of experienced outside experts. Course material is delivered to local study centres in printed form as well as by radio, TV and Internet. As the Registrar, recently pointed out, "Bangladesh Distance Education is getting popularized day by day and it has a very strong potential feature to help solve not only the illiteracy problem the country now suffers but also human resource development."(1) but it is limited by the "scarcity of TV/radio sets and Internet connected computers outside the major cities"(2).

(1) and (2) personal letter from The Registrar dated April 24, 2004

When one considers the fact that study centres are built around *collective* not *individual* reception and that reliable radios today cost an average of 10/20 US dollars while TV sets sell for about 100/150 dollars, one realizes that **basic economics still underlie the choice of essential, appropriate, sustainable technologies at the receive end** , not to mention the possibility of feedback and interactive, constructive dialogue between students and tutors.

Several possibilities are being examined to remedy this situation where the cost of technologies is a serious obstacle to a full development of ODL.

Additional funding in the form of more help from aid donors will obviously come to mind first and foremost..

Another possibility would be to maximise local resources and local media as in the well documented case of Kothmale Community Radio in Sri Lanka where teachers and students send requests for information about the subjects they are studying to the local radio stations which have access to the Internet. The radio presenters download the information requested and then build a radio programme around that information which is then disseminated to the learning groups as well as to the community.

Newer options are also being examined like the adoption of such sustainable technologies as the Worldspace/Asiastar system of satellite-based digital radios that can be operated through a kerosene lamp and serve as Internet downloading units when connected to a computer

The BOU is clearly a case where a correct identification of learners' expectations , adequate course design and learner support are not put to full use because of economic factors affecting the purchase and utilisation of appropriate technology.

Example 3: a shift in students' expectations within an ODL network.

Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), a by-product of the Age of Enlightenment and of the French Revolution, was created in 1794, originally as a Museum of Industry which can still be visited in Paris. In the first half of the 19th century, it diversified into "perfectionnement" (human development) through the creation of night classes in science and technology and progressively became the

closest thing France has to an adult-oriented university. The degrees it awards are well considered and there are major CNAM units in every region.

Some fifteen years ago, one of the CNAM regional centres decided to put some of its programmes on-line, using the networked computer rooms in the local high schools (*lycées*) for evening classes where adults could work in small groups on a proprietary software with a view to obtaining degrees in economics, management, accounting, engineering etc...In the late 90's, CNAM moved onto its own in-house designed and tested e-learning platform and the shift to the Internet meant that students could still work from the usual study rooms but also increasingly from their homes.

This was a simple, logical, foreseeable move, just a learning environment upgrade if we look at things from the outside. The institution had plenty of experience, the tutors were well trained and attentive, the platform is definitely user-friendly and constantly modified in response to students' and teachers' feedback and suggestions.

The difficulties broke out when the ODL unit was asked to address the learning needs of a new social group of adults who wished to obtain academic accreditation for their past professional experience. As the tutors noticed there was a **sudden breakdown** in communication between themselves and the students and among the students themselves. *Chats* were not activated and friendly personal phone calls from the tutors were considered useless or intrusive.

Explanations for this breakdown in a usually smooth distance learning operation are not easy to pinpoint but we may suppose that those adult learners actually resented having to submit themselves to a complex academic process in order to put an official label on the skills they had acquired through years of recognised professional experience. They quite possibly felt that their established social status was being questioned.

Another cause could be the participative style of Web-based courses where everyone is expected to express his/her views in the chats, forums etc. which made them feel more insecure than the traditional passive teacher-student relationship they had known in their school days.