

Caribbean scholarship students use Internet classrooms



open learning Canadian universities, The University of the West Indies (UWI) and four Caribbean governments. The Canadian universities have designed the curriculums and offer them through participating countries, in collaboration with the Ministries of Education, local partners, and UWI's network of facilities. Scholarship recipients are selected primarily by the host governments.

The programme addresses skills shortages in a regional job market with high unemployment levels. Athabasca University provides information technology programmes in Jamaica, Memorial University of Newfoundland offers teacher education in Dominica and in St. Vincent & the Grenadines, and Mount Saint Vincent University proffers tourism management in St. Lucia and in St. Vincent & the Grenadines.

Students receive their learning materials through a variety of media including print materials, CD-ROMs, specifically designed web sites and teleconferencing. Instructors and students "meet" through scheduled chat room sessions; students from different islands, or across the same island, teleconference. Local facilitators provide in-country support and much-needed human interface. All three of the programmes include a period of study at the Canadian campus.

Gleaned from feedback, students like the idea of completing a foreign degree without leaving home or their jobs. Instead of the traditional correspondence course time lag, online learning is immediate; information is quickly applied to the workplace. One difficulty is expensive Internet access on some of the islands, which limits online participation and its overall effectiveness. In some cases, more consistent contact with local facilitators is needed for follow up. In the case of the larger islands, more than one facilitator may be required, as the students are scattered across a broad geographical area.

COL continues the dialogue between students and contributing bodies to fix glitches. Non-participating island governments have expressed interest in the CCDESP; recent informal discussions with DFAIT include a possible continuation of the programme and perhaps expansion. Most importantly, student response is positive. Ms. Aurea Anthony, a St. Lucia scholarship student, sums it up: "The opportunity given is well received, and we will get through the hurdles in due course."

— Grace Chin

TRADITIONAL CORRESPONDENCE distance education is a clunky animal. Paper passes back and forth in the mail. You study in isolation. Your work is examined by an instructor you never see, and seldom contact directly. The process works; the achievement is real. But if you can imagine another, perhaps better way, the alternative now cresting the distance learning wave is the Internet.

It's true that the information superhighway is cluttered with information junk. The Internet's full potential remains unrealised, and is accessible worldwide to a relative few. But amidst the scramble of high tech start-ups, some educators have caught on: the Internet is a valuable tool for long distance education, and in a programme initiated in the Caribbean by The Commonwealth of Learning, some of its vast potential is beginning to be tapped.

The Canada Caribbean Distance Education Scholarship Programme (CCDESP) is an extension of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP). Forty years old, the CSFP is a co-operative education success story that remains focused on providing post-graduate study through traditional means, and regardless of a subject's relevance to the economic climate. Recent cuts to CSFP funding underscore the need for cost-effective, progressive modifications to its approach. The five-year pilot CCDESP, initiated in 1998, brings the CSFP up to speed for the new Millennium; it emphasises undergraduate-level lifelong learning and skills upgrading, and uses new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to conduct long distance learning.

The CCDESP, a programme of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), is being piloted by COL. COL's venture partners are three leading distance and

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