



## **COUNTRY PRESENTATION: BELIZE**

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### **Introduction**

Belize continues to view Open and Distance Learning (ODL) approach to education delivery as a strong and viable option to address the demand for access to education beyond the post primary level. In areas of specialisation such as teacher education and community health and development training, ODL approaches can effectively provide access where distance remains a constraining factor. The challenge over the last two years has been to address the development of the infrastructure and capacity within local institutions to support ODL delivery of programmes. The Ministry of Education, the Office of Governance and the University of Belize have been the key agencies working towards capacity building in order to facilitate ODL as a mode of delivery. Other local institutions do offer some courses by distance mode; however these act as local centres for larger regional and international providers.

### **ODL at the University of Belize**

The Ministry of Education lends full support to the University of Belize in its capacity building to develop infrastructure and capacity for ODL delivery. To date the University of Belize has established a strong E-Learning Steering Committee to spearhead its ODL efforts. In January 2006 the University piloted its first fully online course, *Introduction to Computer Studies*. As of August 2007, the number of students enrolled in the course has more than doubled. The course is now being offered to students in Belize as well as three other Caribbean countries.

The success of the first online course has encouraged the University to increase its efforts to offer more courses at a distance. To date four University faculty members have received training to develop online course materials through the VUSSC project coordinated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). These faculty members upon their return from the VUSSC bootcamps, conducted training for other faculty members to assist them to develop online materials and use distance education tools.

University of Belize faculty members have also benefitted from training in use of distance education tools and distance materials development provided by

the Caribbean Knowledge and Learning Network (CKLN). CKLN, which is headquartered in Grenada, was established in 2004 by Caribbean Heads of Government to enhance the competitiveness of Caribbean countries by upgrading and diversifying skills and knowledge through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) connectivity. CKLN will seek to connect the region's colleges and universities by developing region-wide e-learning programmes and knowledge sharing.

It is anticipated that in the near future the University of Belize will expand its offerings of distance programmes to include teacher education, tourism, workplace empowerment (re-tooling the workforce) and Life Tools (including HIV/AIDS education).

### **E-governance**

The Office of Governance, with assistance from various local and international agencies, continue to pursue efforts at building capacity within the Public Service to maximize the use of ODL in upgrading workplace knowledge and skills. The Office of Governance has conducted numerous workshops and training for public officers to assist them to better engage technology for greater efficiency and effectiveness at the workplace. Currently the use of electronic means of communication is much more prevalent within the Public Service, and in some instances has facilitated group discussion and planning thus effectively reducing expenditure of time, energy and resources that would normally be expended when using the traditional mode of meeting and planning.

### **Other ODL Initiatives:**

#### University of the West Indies:

Through its virtual campus, the University of the West Indies, has introduced programmes of study leading to award of degrees at both the Bachelors and Masters level which fully utilise distance mode of delivery. Students are able to enroll in these programmes through the University's School of Continuing Education in Belize City. These programmes engage the use of online classes, some face to face sessions and printed materials. Currently local enrollment is small, however the programmes offering teacher education degrees receive much more interest and maintain higher enrollment than other courses.

### Caribbean Examinations Council

Belizean secondary and tertiary level learners can join others throughout the English speaking Caribbean in pursuing certification through self study using distance materials developed by CXC with assistance from COL. In 2003 CXC undertook a major initiative to transform some of its examination materials that readily lend themselves to self-study into distance materials (mostly paper) to better accommodate independent and adult learners who wish to upgrade their academic qualifications without having to attend structured classes. This programme is reporting success in the region with increasing enrollment from private candidates.

### Belize's Telesecundaria Project

The telesecundaria initiative is common to Latin America where a number of such programmes are operating successfully to bring secondary education to many rural communities. This project uses satellite technology to broadcast high school level educational programmes to learners where limited numbers of teachers would otherwise greatly reduce the number of persons able to receive a secondary education. The telesecundarias also allow flexible learning as lessons can be transmitted at a convenient time with the use of video cassettes in instances where learners need to work.

The typical Telesecundaria is equipped with a television and a teacher who acts as a resource person as lessons are broadcasted to learners. Currently only one site in Belize operates fully as a telesecundaria. It is hosted in Esquela Secundaria Technica Mexico, a secondary school located in the northern district of Corozal where Spanish is widely spoken.

Two other schools, another in the north and one in the south of the country have embarked on developing the infrastructure to adopt the telesecundaria method to assist early school leavers to pursue a high school education. These schools were assisted to acquire satellite equipment by funds made available through the OAS. Educational materials used in the programme are obtained through the Mexican EDUSAT programme.

## **Conclusion**

As Belize continues to seek to upgrade workforce efficiency in an effort to enhance competitiveness in the global economy, ODL will play a vital role in increasing access and opportunity for training to a wider cross section of the Belizean population. Currently the numbers of trained teachers at both primary and secondary levels remain below 50% even as universal access to primary education is attained and access to secondary education is ever expanding. The use of open and distance learning approaches is

undoubtedly the most effective way to quickly address the need to increase opportunities for untrained and, or aspiring teachers to access teacher training opportunities even in remote areas of the country.

ODL can also provide a solution to the challenge of making secondary education accessible to a wider population as well as early school leavers and adult learners. The country plan for 2006 – 2009 speaks to a number of critical areas that ODL methods may readily facilitate delivery to wider populations that have not yet been addressed such as environmental education, citizenship education and health education. Given the University of Belize's willingness to advance ODL as an alternate mode of delivery, it is anticipated that as its capacity for delivery is enhanced these areas will be addressed sooner rather than later.