Networking for Success: The Guyanese Experience

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The Guyana In-Service Distance Education Project

Abstract

Fifty years ago, British Guiana grappled with the desire for independence. Primary education was compulsory and provided mainly through the church. Few pupils attended secondary schools, which were run by churches and some individuals. Local students competed for scholarships at the University College of the West Indies, and teacher training catered for a very few. Broadcast to schools was started during this period by the Government Information Service, with the earliest programmes produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation. With political independence came the expansion of educational opportunities to allow Guyanese to take responsibility for national development. State funds were poured into the creation of the University of Guyana, buildings for secondary schools and rapid expansion of teacher training. Later curriculum development and assessment were started. The formation of the Caribbean Examinations Council stirred the position taken to prepare all pupils for its examinations. The declaration was made of free education from nursery to university. In all this development no policy was adumbrated to increase the use of distance education. Only within the last decade have policy makers admitted the critical role that distance education can play in increasing access to quality education. However, the use of distance education has depended on the initiatives of individuals. This paper traces the efforts made by providers of distance education to forge ahead for national development.

Background

The well-watered, fertile lands on the northern tip of South America was the site of "tug-o'-war" by European settlers until they were ceded to Great Britain in 1814. Gradually the agricultural focus of British Guiana shifted from tobacco, coffee and cotton to sugar cane sustained through slave labour. The abolition of slavery caused the importation of indentured labour from Portugal and China, then India. Cultivation of rice came with the Indians and thrived after many were given land in lieu of return passage to India. Missionaries from Europe always took the responsibility for teaching the children of the labour force. Small church schools offering primary education were therefore established in towns and villages. However, the children of planters were often sent to the UK for secondary education.

Queen's College was started by the Anglicans in 1844 and St. Stanislaus by the Roman Catholics in 1866. Other secondary schools, mainly in Georgetown and New Amsterdam,

were started by the churches and private individuals. The discovery of gold in 1842, bauxite in 1916, and diamonds in 1922 in commercially viable quantities allowed the creation of small settlements in the interior and townships at McKenzie and Kwakwani. This resulted in primary schools being built throughout Guyana wherever there were large communities.

Although primary schools proliferated there were few secondary schools and these were mostly privately owned. They were established mainly in Georgetown and New Amsterdam. The Government Training College released twenty trained teachers to the system each year. The British Guyana Technical Institute opened its doors in Georgetown. Guyanese vied with other students in the Caribbean for entry into the University College of the West Indies. More affluent ones went to universities in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

Changes within Twenty Years

Within the twenty year period 1950–1970 there were many changes to enable education to push national development. Thirty new government secondary schools were built throughout the coast and in key interior locations. Teacher training was done by three institutions, with an in-service programme allowed training outside of Georgetown. The University of Guyana was established and the link with the University of the West Indies was discontinued. Broadcast to schools was set up in 1954 and provided curriculum support mainly to primary schools.

Many educational developments were taking place, but in discrete pockets, not allowing persons a sense of focused national educational development. Changes in the decade 1970–1980 pushed Guyanese to use initiatives. The declaration of free education from nursery to university was made against the background of national financial recession. The policy of providing quality education throughout Guyana could not be sustained by the national economy. Migration of qualified persons was rife. Professionals who remained were forced to use their own initiatives and contacts to retain standards and create systems they found necessary.

Initial Networking

One such initiative was the use of distance education to train teachers. Although education professionals were not versed in distance education strategies, they demonstrated a willingness to be involved. Recognizing the need for trained science teachers within the secondary system, the Education Officer Science initiated the use of distance education to provide this training. Meanwhile other professionals at the teacher training college embarked on a distance education programme for the training of primary teachers in the hinterland. Both of these programmes drew on the available skills within the "fraternity".

These efforts resulted in the recognition by politicians of the benefits that could accrue through the sharing of skills and cooperation among colleagues. Policy makers therefore attempted to institute the National Council for Distance Education and identified its leadership. This initial effort petered out mainly because professionals viewed it as an imposition.

Development of a Network

Within the last few years networking has involved institutions rather than individuals. The Institute of Distance and Continuing Education (IDCE) has played the role of "big

brother", giving guidance with the birth of new programmes. Staff of IDCE, the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE) and the Faculty of Education, University of Guyana helped with the early development of the Guyana In-Service Distance Education Programme (GUIDE). Each of these units has contributed to the early discussion on and development of the Guyana Basic Education Teacher Training Project (GBET), an externally funded foundation programme for CPCE. Each new programme has started in response to need. Those responsible have drawn on the knowledge and expertise of others. Two years ago the providers of distance education staged their first local conference and followed through with a Caribbean conference last year.

With the imminent cessation of external funding for GUIDE there was a need to establish what impact it had made and explore its future. In conjunction with the management consultants of the International Extension College, GUIDE initiated four action research papers to help inform policy makers who would need to decide on the development strategies for GUIDE. In November of 1988 the providers of distance education were brought together to decide on the strategy of the research. The research was commissioned during February and completed by December of 1999. It was during this period that providers, meeting on a regular basis to ensure completion of tasks, expressed the desire to work as a consortium. The appointment of an in-country research mentor/manager cemented this concept of a group of distance education providers working together. These providers saw the need for articulation of a national policy on distance education as critical and urgent. They decided to work on the development of such a policy as their first task.

In the meantime, GUIDE, concerned about making learning resource centres more effective in the delivery of support for its students, organized a consultancy to examine and make recommendations for the improved functioning of these centres. The consultant lauded the cooperative efforts of the providers and suggested the immediate formation of a national distance education network that would coordinate programmes to be used in the resource centres and link these programmes with community needs. Another consultancy examining the organizational capacity of the Ministry of Education had also acknowledged the benefits of this working together, noting the lack of coordination except through the initiative of the providers of distance education.

During May this year GUIDE organized a seminar to allow dissemination of the "findings" of the research and the resource centre consultancy. The distance education providers worked together at this seminar articulating action needed to take distance education forward. Of central importance in taking distance education forward is the recommendation for the formation of a national council for distance education. The final report is to be tabled with the policy makers of the University of Guyana and the Ministry of Education.

Although this body is not legally constituted, the Ministry of Education would from time to time seek advice on practical issues in the field of distance education from the group of distance education providers. Most recently senior policy makers in the Ministry of Education has asked that the network provide a five year plan for the continued development of distance education in Guyana.

Conclusion

The group of distance education providers meets once each month. Working together is contributing to the cementing of ideas to help with coordination of distance education locally. Policy makers are beginning to appreciate the difficulty of translating philosophical statements into reasonable action. They are looking to the network for pragmatism. The network, affording all providers the opportunity to suggest and share, is working. The strong feeling of ownership and crafting of developmental strategies by the providers themselves have contributed to this success. Team spirit is fostered and institutions are willing to strengthen each other for the national good.