

**Distance Education in Small States:  
The Case of the Turks and Caicos Islands**

*Carlton M. Mills*

*Deputy Principal, TCI Community College, P.O. Box 236,  
Grand Turk, Turks and Caicos Islands*

**Abstract**

As we venture into the twenty-first century, it is becoming increasingly clear that our ability to cope with the rapid changes and challenges brought on by the new information age at both the micro and the macro levels will become the primary measuring stick for success. These changes were dominant during the twentieth century and will continue to dominate our lives in the new millennium. Education is one sector that has been impacted by these developments. The acquisition of knowledge has become a central theme of development both for the individual as well as for society at large. In response to this, many countries have placed a high priority on attaining higher and higher levels of knowledge through widespread education and training as one means of empowering their people in order to cope effectively with these changes. There is therefore the need for greater access to educational provisions by introducing more self-directed and more flexible approaches to learning, so that a broader cross-section of the population can benefit. The call is for distance education to address these issues.

This paper attempts to address the role of distance education as one of the major means of providing the opportunity to equip the population of the Turks and Caicos Islands to deal more effectively with these new challenges. Some of the main issues that can impact upon the successful delivery of such a programme are addressed. The paper addresses certain pertinent questions: What is distance education? What benefits can accrue to the Turks and Caicos Islands? A primary concern has to do with the scattered nature of the islands and how effectively distance education will help in unifying these islands. There is also the question of management and funding of the process. Unashamedly, the paper may offer more questions than answers.

## **Introduction**

Several studies (Miller et al., 1994; Hamilton, 1998; Ellis, 1999; and Ministry of Education, 1999–2004) have spelled out the need for the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) to provide a higher level of training for its people to meet the growing employment demand brought on by an upsurge in economic activity as a result of developments in tourism, off-shore banking and construction. These studies also revealed that the country is not producing the quantity or the quality of highly skilled workers to effectively manage this upsurge in growth and development.

While addressing these fundamental challenges, we have to ensure that the majority of the indigenous population is sensitized to the changing landscapes and that they are equipped with the skills and expertise to deal effectively with them. The paper will examine the role of distance education as the primary instrument that can help to equip the population with the necessary skills, knowledge and dispositions which will enable them to transform the economy more profoundly.

It will also address certain fundamental questions such as: What is distance education (DE)? What benefits are derived from it? To what extent is DE addressing the needs of the TCI? What strategies can be employed to ensure that the islands reap maximum benefits from DE initiatives? The paper will examine some of the DE initiatives in the TCI in addition to some of the critical issues associated with it. Some prospects for the future will be highlighted as a means of revitalizing interest in DE. It is hoped that these will help in some way to influence policy guidelines in light of such initiatives.

As we venture into the new millennium, the TCI will have to think more critically about nation

building and sustainability. It will therefore mean providing greater access to DE so that more people will have ready access to quality education at a more affordable cost.

## **What Is Distance Education?**

Hedge (1996) states that DE is exciting, challenging and here to stay. He also sees it as representing opportunities for continuing education that further enhance the notion of life-long learning. It provides the opportunity for self-directed and independent learning. It also represents a flexible mode of learning for students, particularly the working adult population who cannot afford to commit to full-time studies because of their work schedules and other related responsibilities.

Hedge (1996) also sees DE as learning in an environment in which tutors and learners are not, for the most part, in a face-to-face situation. This definition challenges the traditional 'talk and chalk' model of learning. This is why 'openness' and 'flexibility' are terms that are synonymous with DE.

Holmbery (1982, 27), cited in Hedge (1996, 15), makes the point that "distance learners are not under continuous immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premise". This statement tends to suggest a self-directed, independent approach to learning. It also suggests a type of environment in which the learners are relaxed and comfortable, thus setting the kind of climate that is conducive to learning. It shifts the emphasis from teaching to learning. The individuals "learn how to learn" as they progress through their course of study. It also describes a shift towards a more 'learner centred' approach to the delivery of education (Martin, 1997). It also provides the flexibility needed to

tailor education or training to the specific needs of employers and employees.

DE is a natural choice because it enables colleges and universities to deliver programmes and services where employees and students are located, regardless of how remote or disperse they may be (Keegan, 1996; Chute and Gulliver, 1999).

### **Distance Education Initiatives in the Turks and Caicos Islands**

Prior to the setting up of the University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) in the TCI, the University of the West Indies (UWI) administered the Certificate in Public Administration (Challenge Scheme) in partnership with the Government Staff Training Unit. Lecturers from the UWI visited periodically to teach the programme. This took the form of face-to-face interaction in a traditional way where lectures were given, participation encouraged and materials relevant to the course were disseminated. At the end of the semester, formal examinations were written. The papers were sent to the university for marking. On successful completion of the course, formal certification was awarded to candidates.

In addition to this programme, the Institute of Management and Production in Jamaica, the Barbados Institute of Management and the Civil Service Training College in the United Kingdom were invited by the Staff Training Unit to run short courses in Management for Middle and Senior Managers in the Public Service.

These courses ranged from three days to two weeks and were primarily geared towards upgrading the skills and content base of personnel, thereby helping to improve

efficiency and productivity in the workplace. However, many of the persons who benefited from this level of training were reluctant to share the new knowledge they obtained with their colleagues in the workplace. A lack of accountability resulted in information not being disseminated.

UWIDEC is currently the main provider of DE in the islands. The programme started in September 1998 on Grand Turk and Providenciales. The University Centre is located on Grand Turk. In 1999, the programme was extended to South Caicos. Students are currently pursuing certificate and degree level courses in Business Administration, Public Administration and Management Studies. The number of applicants for these programmes is increasing annually. This is a clear indication that individuals are recognizing the need for higher education to unlock their potential for growth and development.

UWIDEC has its headquarters at the Cave Hill campus in Barbados with offices at the other two main campuses. The site in the TCI is administered from the Mona campus in Jamaica. UWIDEC is responsible for facilitating the planning, preparation and implementation of DE programmes and services offered by the university.

A site coordinator is appointed by the university, with responsibilities for the administration of the programmes and recruitment of staff locally. Local tutors assist with the face-to-face delivery of the courses since teleconferencing facilities are not yet in place. UWIDEC is developing and delivering quality programmes by distance to the TCI which is a noncampus territory and in so doing, it is meeting some of the higher educational learning needs of the islands far more cost-effectively than if students had

to pursue the same kinds of training overseas.

With the coming of UWIDEC, it is anticipated that the critical issues in DE in the TCIs will be more adequately addressed. The paper will now focus on some of these issues.

### **Critical Issues in the Development of Distance Education**

There are a number of critical issues that are associated with the effective delivery of DE in the TCI. I will highlight those which, in my view, are seen as more pronounced. They include the geographic and demographic features of the islands, attitudes and administration and management problems.

#### ***Geographic and Demographic Problems***

The TCIs comprise approximately 43 islands with an estimated population of 12,000 people (1990 Population Census). Nine of the islands are currently inhabited. With the alarming growth of the economy, the population is currently estimated at around 24,000 people (Standard of Living Assessment Report, 1999). It also estimates that approximately three-quarters of the population reside in Providenciales, which is the main hub of economic activity. The disperse nature of the islands results in duplication of resources.

Territories with small populations, such as the TCI, can help to minimize the provision of structures for the effective delivery of DE. Thompson (1982) makes reference to this and he also notes that particular attention needs to be paid to the economic feasibility of DE programmes and the ability of a small state to sustain them. This is why Chute and Gulliver (1999) tell us that when a small state (like the TCI) is implementing such programmes, it should build its course development capacities

in a manner that makes adaptation of existing elements to new education needs and training possible.

Travel between the islands is costly since the main means of transportation is by air. Most of the in-service training by the Department of Education is conducted on Grand Turk (the capital). Participants have to travel from the various islands to attend such training. In addition, they have to be accommodated for the duration of the training. With such high cost involved, very little in-service training is undertaken. On the other hand, in the absence of regular in-service training, individuals are not generally kept abreast of new developments in their specialist areas.

Attitudes are driving forces behind the successful implementation of new initiatives. There are serious attitudinal problems in the islands. One such problem is that some adults do not have much faith in the DE initiative. They still believe that proper qualifications can only be obtained through the traditional classroom approach. There are some who believe that this approach is superior to the DE model. This could be one of the reasons why there is a constant 'drop out' rate on DE courses. Some students complain that the workload is unmanageable, difficult and time consuming. Others argue that the lack of library facilities denies them the opportunity to have ready access to information.

There are students who are of the view that the government is obligated to finance their studies and if such funding is denied, they usually opt to discontinue their studies rather than explore the possibility of acquiring funding from other sources. Few take the initiative to finance their studies privately.

There are others who do not see any benefits

deriving from education. Ellis (1999) notes that there seems to be a general lack of motivation and interest in continuing education among significant numbers of the population. She also recognizes that many young school leavers prefer to join the workforce with the expectation that this will bring them a sense of financial independence. She emphasizes the seriousness of this attitude by quoting one person in the islands as saying: "You don't need no set of education to get a big job, it is who you know. Plenty people in big positions not educated" (p.15). This response is a clear indication of the value that is being placed on education by some locals. It tends to suggest the ease with which they can obtain jobs. There are instances when people are given jobs as a result of political patronage. It generally has nothing to do with their level of academic qualifications or their ability to perform on the job.

Studies by Bizzocchi (1996) and Gallagher (1995) show that increasingly students are taking the necessary steps required to improve their learning with the access to online courses and the availability of computers at reduced prices. There is the need for a more extensive review and re-orientation of this mindset in the TCI which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

### ***Administration and Management***

Historically, the dispersed nature of the islands has given rise to island segregation and discrimination. Since Grand Turk is the capital and centre of government, it is generally believed that it should also be the centre of academia. This attitude severely hampers the expansion of programme development in the family islands and it also contributes to further entrenchment of the resentment and animosity among the respective islanders (Caribbean Development Bank Draft Report, 1997).

When UWI proposed the establishment of a distance education centre in the islands, Grand Turk and Providenciales were suggested as the two sites. In keeping with their policy, the government agreed that a centre be established on Grand Turk only. There are people in the family islands who are reluctant to leave their jobs and come to Grand Turk to study. Limited employment opportunities on Grand Turk do not warrant them doing this.

Some administrators have acquired their positions as a result of the number of years they have spent in the public service. Many of them do not possess the qualifications required for the specific job. As a result, they feel overlooked and insecure when younger persons are given the opportunities to pursue further training. They also feel that they would be direct threats to their jobs so they employ certain strategies to deny them the opportunity to pursue training.

Job promotion and training opportunities are generally a reward for political patronage. Little emphasis is placed on acquiring the appropriate qualifications to enter jobs in the public service. It is quite common to hear administrators admit that the government does not pay for qualifications. This raises concern as to the quality of performance by persons in the public service who lack the appropriate training and qualifications.

Some administrators also believe that quality education can only be obtained overseas rather than at the local community college. It clearly demonstrates a total distrust in the local educational system. In cases where programmes are not available locally, they tend to employ tactics to prevent employees from pursuing such programmes overseas. Little effort is made to ensure that such programmes are made

available through the college because of fear that too many people would benefit from higher levels of training. To them, knowledge is power and the more they can suppress the acquisition of it, the more control they will be able to exercise over their subordinates. Even in remote situations where persons get the opportunity to pursue undergraduate studies overseas, on their return they are generally exposed to such frustrating situations that they are forced to seek employment in the private sector. There is an urgent need to sensitize administrators to develop close collaboration in the workplace to further enhance relationships and performance of employees.

With its small size and population, it is necessary that the TCI create a culture of learning (Quicke, 1999). This culture of learning should be both lifelong and pervasive across all sections of the population. It requires continuity and coherence across all phases of the education system. The next section of the paper seeks to address the extent to which this is possible.

### **Prospects for the Future**

There are several strategies that can be used to promote DE in the islands. Because of restrictions on this paper, I will highlight just a few. These include the role of technology, structured student support services, and progress through partnership. These strategies can help to maximize teacher resources, facilitate improvements in the delivery of education and meet the learning needs of an ever-widening student population.

#### ***The Role of Technology***

There is an exorbitant cost associated with the present provision of training in the islands, given their scattered population, geographic distances and a heavy reliance on expatriate labour in

many key sectors of the economy. The Five-Year Education Development Plan (Ministry of Education, 1999–2004) notes that it costs the government approximately US\$400,000.00 annually to sustain the number of expatriate teachers in the system. This does not include other expatriate contract workers. In addition, the Plan notes that the government also invests some US\$1.5 million annually on overseas scholarships. As a result, a significant portion of the budget is allocated for training and remuneration of expatriate staff.

The rapid expansion of the hospitality industry on Providenciales has given rise to a rapid increase in population on this island, resulting in the need to provide more educational opportunities so that the indigenous population can be better equipped to take on leadership roles and responsibilities (Caribbean Development Bank Draft Report, 1997). Technology is best suited to serve these needs.

Video-conferencing facilities with computer support systems should be installed on all of the islands to better serve the educational needs of the respective communities. The college can be the main educational facility to which all other workstations in the family islands will be connected. With the use of these facilities, more students will be able to benefit from courses and workshops not only for academic purposes, but also for in-service training. These facilities will significantly reduce cost. Individuals can meet at the respective centres located on each island and interact as if they were in a face-to-face situation. In the case of lectures, the college will be able to facilitate individuals in all the islands simultaneously. Instead of having a lecturer for each course at each location, only one person per course will most likely be required.

In the case of individual islands with small populations, they will not be denied the opportunity to participate in a particular course of study because of a shortage of students or because of a lack of available teachers or trainers. Since all the islands will be connected to the system at the same time doing the same course, where there is a fall in numbers at one site, it will be offset by increased numbers at other sites. If a person is transferred to work in another island, his or her education does not have to be discontinued because the same facilities and opportunities will be available on all islands.

These conferencing facilities will also allow locals to participate in workshops in other Caribbean countries without having to leave home, thus contributing to further cost reductions and solving the problem of the absence of individuals from their workplaces for extended periods of time. It will, however, require additional physical infrastructure to be put in place to facilitate the process. The various high schools in the islands can be equipped to function as centres. The centres can be fully utilized by allowing the primary and high school students to use the facilities during the day and the adult population can have access to them during the evening.

Despite these obvious benefits, the concern as to whether this technology is contextually and culturally appropriate to facilitate the training and educational aspirations of the people needs to be examined more closely.

### ***Structured Student Support***

The development of DE in the islands will have to facilitate a wide cross section of the population. The first step that is needed is for a major public information campaign to sensitize the population to the importance of DE (Chute

and Gulliver, 1999). Extensive use of the media (both electronic and print) will have to be used in this awareness campaign. Courses that are developed will have to be user-friendly and adapted to the respective needs of the individuals and the community concerned in order to encourage people to participate. The language and forms of expressions should also be a reflection of the culture of the society. The success of this initiative will significantly depend on the extent to which people can easily identify with the courses that are being offered.

Tutors will have to be appointed at the respective centres to provide the necessary support and encouragement to students. With this approach, the role of the tutors will have to be redefined. Tutors should be facilitators of interactive learning and provide guidance and timely feedback on work for students. They will also have to work with the students from initial enrolment to completion of their programmes, encouraging them not to drop out. It is anticipated that this will encourage a higher level of enrolment and participation on the part of students.

Different levels of entry matriculation and different instructional techniques are essential in order to facilitate mature students. The traditional three-hour 'mind bugging' examinations should not form an integral part of the assessment process.

Adequate electronic libraries are essential to support this initiative so that students can have ready access to the World Wide Web to obtain information to assist them in their research work. Student orientation and tutor training are essential for continuity of this initiative.

In an age of scarce resources and emphasis on collaboration, 'partnerships' have become a

popular concept in further education. Partnerships are essential for the implementation and sustainability of DE in the TCI. No single entity has the resources (financial or human) to function independently. In order for this initiative to survive, it will require joint government/private sector partnerships. These partnerships can be established by the government introducing the kinds of legislation that will require investors to make annual financial contributions to the advancement of education in the islands. On the other hand, the government can assure them that certain tax incentives will be offered for their corporations.

In order to further facilitate these partnerships, the private sector should also be encouraged to use the available facilities and resources to assist in the training of their own staff. Chute and Gulliver (1999) make the point that organizations must train and retrain their employees in order to increase their knowledge base. This is essential because knowledge is viewed as a corporate asset and the sharing of knowledge is a key to future competitiveness. To further facilitate this process, the local college with its faculty, expertise and instructional experience can award credits and certificates of achievement on completion of programmes to the participants. The private sector can also help with providing technical assistance and personnel to assist in the training exercises. They can also assist with the provision of scholarships, purchasing of new technology and upkeep since such technology is not cheap.

In a rapidly changing educational environment, colleges and universities must expand their 'markets', find new students or 'consumers' for their 'products' and develop new products geared to the needs of these new consumers. Partnerships are emerging as an efficient and

effective means to achieve these objectives (Chute and Gulliver, 1999; Perry and Ball, 1998). Chute and Gulliver (1999) also state that partnerships will help to break down the barriers of understanding and communication between academia and the workplace. As a result, it will go a long way in helping to fuel innovations.

Despite these positive benefits, Chute and Gulliver (1999) also note that there are difficulties with such partnerships. They argue that partnerships require a great deal of effort and willingness to compromise on the part of each partner. They also note that there needs to be clear, commonly understood expectations on the part of all parties and that communication is an important element in the success or failure of such initiatives.

Some private sector organizations are primarily profit driven rather than developmental oriented. It will therefore require serious commitment and collaboration from both sectors for any such initiatives to work effectively. These joint initiatives can help in providing the TCI with a high-powered, skills-oriented workforce to meet the needs of the expanding economy (Hamilton, 1998).

The present growth and expansion of the local economy in the TCIs has prompted the need for additional skills through the delivery of quality education so that its citizens can fully grasp the opportunities presented for national development (Miller et al., 1994; Hamilton, 1998). The paper notes that despite the geographic and demographic features of the islands, these factors should not inhibit our attempts to provide quality education that is central to policies on national development. The paper also makes reference to certain challenges that the TCI face in their efforts to

successfully deliver educational programmes. It suggests that technology, student support services and joint government/private sector partnerships are extremely effective in providing the necessary training in order to meet the needs of the society.

Some alternatives have been suggested as a means of facilitating these initiatives. The paper also shows how successfully these alternatives have worked in other territories with similar experiences to the TCI (Thompson, 1982; Caribbean Development Bank Draft Report, 1997).

As we attempt to unlock our potential in the new millennium, technology will continue to influence our lives. The TCI has to provide the necessary facilities and opportunities for such potentials to be realized. If not, we will find ourselves being left behind (Ellis, 1999). We have to realize that mere size is neither a measurement nor is it an inhibiting factor towards our success. The challenge will be for our institutions to keep pace with learner demands as innovators make more options available and geographical barriers begin to dissolve (Martin, 1997). We have to be able to compete globally if we are going to prevent ourselves from being engulfed by the major world powers. In order to compete successfully in this global marketplace, it will require that our people be adequately trained. Budgets should keep pace with the upgrade paths in technology and new options should be considered. Policies should be flexible to accommodate and facilitate the necessary changes. Effective transition to these new options will require a rethinking of organizational priorities and structures. The challenge is for the TCI to keep pace with these new demands. It is suggested that distance education can provide the kinds of training that

is required for the TCI to keep pace with new innovations in the new millennium. It will also empower people and bring about the kind of mind-set that will enable them to be better able to deal with the new challenges.

## **Bibliography**

Bizzocchi, J. (1996). Draft Report of the Distributed Learning Task Force, SCOET Website.

Caribbean Development Bank Draft Report. (1997). "In The Use of Distance Education Technologies in the Education System." Ministry of Education, Turks and Caicos Islands Government.

Chute, A. and Gulliver (1999). *Distance Education and Partnerships: Tools for the Future*. Centre For Excellence in Distance Learning (CEDL).

Ellis, P. (1999). "Draft Report on Adult Education in the Turks and Caicos Islands." Ministry of Education, Turks and Caicos Islands Government.

Gallagher, P. (1995). *Changing Course: An Agenda for Real Reform of Canadian Education*. Toronto: OISE Press.

Hamilton, T. (1998). "Report on Human Resource Development in The Turks and Caicos Islands." Turks and Caicos Islands Government.

Hedge, N. (1996). "Balancing the Elements: A Way of Looking at Issues in Distance Education," in *Going the Distance: Teaching, Learning and Research in Distance Education*, edited by N. Hedge, pp.11-39. USDE Series, England.

Keegan, D. (1996). *Foundation of Distance Education*, third edition. London: Routledge.

Martin, R. (1997). "Key Issues in Transitioning from Distance Education to Distributed Learning," *Outlining Chronicle of Distance Education and Communication* 12, no.1 (Spring): 1-6.

Miller, E., Forde, G., and Smith, O. (1994). "A Review of Primary and Secondary School Performance in The Turks and Caicos Islands." Millrowe Consultants Ltd., Jamaica.

Ministry of Education, Turks and Caicos Islands Government, Five Year Education Development Plan (1999-2004).

Perry, C. and Ball, I. (1998). "What Do Teachers Really Know About Work? Professional

Development Through Education-Industry Links," *Teacher Development* 2, no.1: 73-85.

Standard of Living Assessment Report (1999). Turks and Caicos Islands Government.

Thompson, A. (1982). "Background to INSET," in *Inservice Education of Teachers in the Commonwealth*, pp.104-136. London: Commonwealth Secretariat.

Turks and Caicos Islands Government, Population Census (1990).

Quicke, J. (1999). *A Curriculum for Life*. London: Open University Press.