



CHAPTER 3

THE POTENTIAL LEARNERS

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INTRODUCTION

When we talk about “potential learners,” it is unhelpful to dissociate them from their environment, more so because the economic well-being of the respective countries in which they live vary. Also, existing national educational provision and economic and social services are essential contributory factors worthy of consideration. More relevant, perhaps, is that the dictates of the national job market should serve as an indicator for the skills needed for sustenance and potential national economic development. Ignoring all these attendant influences in national development where diverse economic backgrounds dictate their respective national policies would only result in an incomplete picture of the status quo.

Therefore, a chapter devoted to a study of potential learners using the open and distance learning (ODL) mode for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programme/qualifications cannot be considered in isolation from the countries from which the ODL institutions operate or, indeed, from the kinds of programmes they offer. The increasing interest in globalisation of education might change the direction of national policies, especially within the economically disadvantaged countries, but there is evidence to suggest that ODL practitioners in some of these countries are as attuned to concerns of access and quality as are practitioners in the North. For example, refinement of ODL provision in the Commonwealth has not been exclusive to the economically developed countries (Nanda, 2000; Numan and Alagmir, 2000; Reddi, 2000; Smith, 2000). Issues of quality, access and variety are much in evidence among concerns of ODL institutions and practitioners in Asia, where enforcement of standards of quality is embedded in the national policies of some countries and where economies of scale are much more successfully realised than in sub-Saharan Africa and the many small states in the Commonwealth (Mills and Tait, 2000; Reddi, 2000).

Much of the analysis here of the issues regarding potential learners using ODL for TVET programmes concentrates, therefore, on developments within the Commonwealth. This group of nations reflects a microcosm of the rest of the world in terms of cultural and socio-economic mix, and so conclusions reached will have relevance beyond geographical boundaries. Given also that the majority of the countries in the Commonwealth are economically disadvantaged, the *laissez-faire* approach that dominates choice exercised by potential learners in economically advantaged countries

does not exist in the rest of the Commonwealth or in those countries with a similar economic background. Here, choice is not only restricted to those who can afford to pay. Some of the TVET programmes offered are directed and driven more by design for the benefit of targeted groups or communities than for individuals. Planned training provided in this way makes specific impact on the economic welfare of those targeted audiences, whether community groups or special workers. As planned development programmes, they often have their basis in health or agriculture and their impact offer some measure of sustainability where none existed previously. Within the context of TVET programmes for potential learners, however, a much wider range of skills training is not only expected but is also inevitable. This will not preclude more of them continuing to be planned programmes as some of them have been in the past.

LOCATING TVET PROGRAMMES IN ODL

Considering the impact of TVET cadre of staff anywhere as the lifeblood of service of the nation, their value to their respective nation's economic well-being must be regarded as no less than its mainstay for wealth creation and accumulation. Within this context, potential learners who would benefit from TVET programmes offered through ODL cut across a wide range of educational, social and economic levels. One of the largest target groups, particularly within the developing world, is that of illiterate people. With 72% of all the illiterate people in the world living in nine high-population countries (Visser, 1994), any planned ODL programmes for potential learners realising a measure of success in those specific countries alone would have a substantial impact on their economies.

Also worth mentioning is that teenagers will comprise the single largest group in the world in the next 20 years. In the developing South, this has already been realised and the level of unemployment among the young is very high. Implementing TVET programmes through ODL will not only transform the economic power of the beneficiaries, the weak economies of the South will improve considerably. Indeed, TVET programmes offer better opportunities for skills training where beneficiaries could become self-employed or established in family enterprises. Given the claim that half of the world's employed labour force is in that category (Bartram, 2000), the long-term implication is that training offered in a variety of locally targeted but employable job possibilities could equip a large proportion of illiterate and unskilled people with employable skills.

There is ample evidence supporting the potential of ODL delivery systems as being appropriate for equipping illiterates with skills (John, 1996a; Kinyanjui, 1995; Perraton, 1993). The examples highlighted later in this chapter elucidate the spread and impact. Suffice it to say at this stage that groups of illiterate and literate beneficiaries (both men and women) have acquired skills in areas such as basic agriculture and animal husbandry, thereby transforming lives of social and economic vulnerability to economic empowerment. The same mode has been applied to impart skills training in carpentry, artisanry and building technology among displaced peoples returning to Namibia (Dodds, 1994).

TVET programmes offered through ODL need not apply to just those examples mentioned. TVET also responds readily to the introduction of the Internet for more sophisticated ODL approaches to learning, which reflects the other end of the spectrum where course designers develop and modify teaching strategies for a better student-centred approach with greater beneficial consequences (Mills and Tait, 2000). The

replication in several African countries of the INADES (L'Institut Africain pour le Developpement Economique et Social) programme in agriculture and that of AMREF (African Medical and Research Foundation) in primary health care is a testimony of their quality and effectiveness. Other potential learners in a wide variety of contexts could witness the transformation to financial security in their future. These include women marginalised through cultural practices (Dodds and Mayo, 1992), refugees displaced by political instability at home (Inquai, 1993) or nationals living in small states where access to educational opportunities are restricted.

All of the above ODL examples have their existence and implementation practices rooted in national or institutional policies. Potential learners could therefore be better provided for where education policies, either at national or regional levels, endeavour to implement TVET programmes using ODL as part of the general education provision. The success of national ODL policies is well established in countries in the South, such as India, Hong Kong, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. National policies also have the potential of even greater impact where regional groupings are in place, thereby avoiding the potential threat of globalisation. Thus, the implication for potential learners working in an environment of regional economic co-operation to address the requirement for their respective TVET programmes through ODL have far-reaching consequences for successful outcomes.

RATIONALISING THE DELIVERY OF TVET THROUGH ODL

The effectiveness of the ODL delivery mechanisms has been very well rehearsed. The so-called three generations of ODL practice are still in use, each considered appropriate and effective in their respective contexts. The question, therefore, of utilising an appropriate ODL delivery method for potential learners offering TVET programmes depends largely on other factors, such as the institution hosting the delivery of the programme, resources available and infrastructure requirements. Given the socio-economic structures of countries in the Commonwealth, even those in the South may require differing delivery methods for TVET programmes. Where national or regional arrangements are adopted, articulating the issues beyond the confines of the institution responsible would bring out the merits or otherwise of one method as against another.

UNESCO has, on several occasions, initiated moves to mobilise developing countries and spearhead discussions about ODL delivery mechanisms on a co-operative basis (Visser, 1994). The idea of establishing multi-channel distance learning centres within Africa for use by ODL practitioners in the continent was mooted in 1995 — an ideal concept that might have resulted in the development of TVET programmes for all sub-Saharan Africa. In spite of its relevance for this purpose, the pace and widespread use of ICT in ODL practice provides another dimension to the delivery of TVET programmes for potential learners. There are many advantages to the idea of a network situation where programmes could be accessed by potential learners in several countries.

The increasing spread of globalisation of ODL offers the idea of lifelong learning a lifeline across national boundaries, despite economically disadvantaged countries feeling threatened (Alexander, 1999; Tarafadar and Alam, 2000). Furthermore, the potential of launching TVET programmes to a mass audience must have appeal to the volume of beneficiaries. Its merit lies in the immediacy of its impact and the prospect it offers of quality programmes for potential learners whose economic transformation would be widespread with lasting repercussions beyond the individuals themselves.

IS GLOBALISATION THE WAY FORWARD?

Speaking from an idealistic standpoint, everyone is a potential learner. The move towards the idea of lifelong learning has developed a force of its own that suggests inclusion rather than exclusion. ODL institutions in the prosperous North are expanding their horizons with increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a means of delivery (Ohiorhenuan, 1998). Potential learners in the North have a lead in the use of the technology that could result in “technology leapfrogging” for potential learners in the South (Choucri, 1998).

Globalisation as a general concept in world trade, finance and now in education is a fluid phenomenon whose impact on the world stage has been described as operating in a Darwinian framework (Sakbani, 1998). So, in terms of its appropriateness for the disadvantaged economies of the South, one can speculate about both its worthiness for TVET programmes and how long it will be before it is implemented.

There are a number of factors to consider when attempting to assess the viability of globalisation as a mode of delivery for potential learners of TVET programmes. For example, its impact on the economy of countries in the South has, historically, been negative (Tarafadar and Alam, 2000). This has led to the vulnerable economies of the developing Commonwealth countries being suspicious from the onset. In fact, the impact on ODL practices arising from World Bank/IMF structural adjustment policies, particularly in the case of recipients of loans in African countries, has adversely affected quality (John, 1996b). The evidence of globalisation continues to offer threat to the pessimists, thus making its appropriateness for the delivery of TVET programmes to potential learners a questionable prospect in the immediate future for some countries.

However, another view of globalisation is that it offers positive challenges for the general development of weaker national economies (Gordimer, 1998). Potential learners in such environments are seen to have a lot to gain from TVET programmes using the ODL mode. Consequently, the best solution for those countries is to look for creative economic ideas which combine their well-being, in terms of income-generating schemes, and the political will for good governance. For example, implementation of regional intra-trade policies has been identified as a positive force in minimising the impact of global influence on the national economy (Sakbani, 1998). In that context, the view that some countries in the South are “almost integrated into the globalised economy” may serve as a pointer for what is achievable for all countries in the South (Ohiorhenuan, 1998).

Infrastructure deficiency is usually offered as the main cause of the problem with ODL provision in all sub-regions in the South, even though the factors affecting their respective sub-regional infrastructure may be different. Thus it is possible that differences in economic performance in a South-South context may not always militate against the globalisation of TVET programmes by ODL. Evidence can be adduced in support of this view, particularly in Asia, where seven of the 12 “dynamic developing countries” in the world are located (Khor, 1998). There, per capita incomes today are at least seven times what they were in 1960. (In contrast, sub-Saharan Africa has struggled for years in a declining economic environment caused by persistent political instability. Per capita incomes there are lower than they were in 1970.) Given also that the concept of globalisation is regarded as market driven (Ohiorhenuan, 1998), its strength for countries in the developing South may be found in joint ventures and co-operative schemes, whether political, educational or commercial, that provide the force to minimise the Darwinian effect mentioned earlier. Global ODL delivery of TVET

programmes to potential learners has a much stronger prospect of being realised sooner in the Asia sub-region than some may expect (Aslam, 2000).

Further support has been adduced by evidence of buoyant trade results in Asia and Latin America where, for example, economic and political ties have strengthened over a period of time. In turn, co-operation in matters of politics, commerce and education, including ODL, has encouraged the growth of regionalisation against the impact of globalisation (Sakbani, 1998). The effect has created a level of commitment which has fostered political stability and nurtured standardisation of good management practice. Such a record of regional co-operation, political stability and vigorous intra-trade practice offers a good prospect of effecting global TVET programmes by ODL to potential learners in those regions.

Looking at the scenario posed by the sub-regions of the South, it is true that some regions are better prepared than others for ODL globalisation of TVET programmes to their potential learners. However, there must be no blanket disregard for its implementation on a sub-regional basis, considering its potential to empower marginalised groups.

SOME EXAMPLES

There is no better way to support proposed ODL practices than to show through examples what has been achieved elsewhere. Limited resources and lives of struggle within developing countries perpetuate underdevelopment, and strategic planning of a radical kind is required to force the pace of change in national and human development. The following examples are meant to serve as a guide to planners of TVET programmes for potential learners by ODL.

Formal education provision

There are several instances where ODL techniques have been or are being applied to TVET programmes. A look at the database of the International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL) will show the range and variety of distance taught courses and programmes available that may provide information about existing programmes for potential learners elsewhere and about institutions which could offer assistance. Visit their Web site at www-icdl.open.ac.uk for details.

Skills transfer and collaboration

Regional groupings and inter-governmental organisations like The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and UNESCO form the caucus of institutional collaborators that offer and facilitate TVET programmes by ODL to potential learners. In Asia, for example, regional meetings leading to working documents, such as the Asia-Pacific Workshop on Vocational Education and Distance Education held in Seoul, Korea, 1996, attest to the level of commitment mentioned earlier. The possibility, therefore, of a mass TVET programme for potential learners is not outside the scope and ability of practitioners in that sub-region. Political will is the key to the solution.

Furthermore, COL facilitates collaboration between institutions that potential learners may benefit from. Just one is the North-South collaboration of distance-taught programmes made available by The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (TOPNZ) for the

training of surveyors in Zimbabwe. Other examples of North-South collaboration within the Commonwealth have been well documented in COL's newsletter, *Connections*, and other sources (Fordham, 1990; Kinyanjui, 1995).

However, the most popular training programme in many developing Commonwealth countries is that which uses the ODL mode to provide untrained/unqualified teachers with professional training without having to leave their classroom for full-time training. Botswana, Kenya, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Guyana, Bangladesh, St. Lucia and Papua New Guinea have all used ODL courses to train teachers and thereby improve their performance in the classroom (Brophy, 1982; Hossain, 2000; Perraton, 1993; Young, 1991). Two other examples of North-South and South-South collaboration in teacher education again provide access to good quality material for further extended use in the Commonwealth (John, 1996a,b; Kinyanjui, 1995; Rotary Club, 1994).

Non-formal education provision

ODL continues to play a revitalising role for developing economies by imparting various functional skills directly to those whose livelihoods are likely to benefit from the experience (Perraton, 1993; Salooja and Naidu, 2000). In countries across Africa and in Asia, programmes in primary health care and agriculture have been introduced in response to popular concerns which required the attention of national and local governments (Dodds and Mayo, 1992). Within Africa, one notable example is a programme initiated by INADES-Formation, where groups of farmers, the majority of whom are illiterate, agree to study together (INADES-Formation, 1994). The texts, heavily illustrated in colour, visually convey information on what constitutes healthy plants and rich soil. Assignments become a group effort, and the onus is on field workers to ensure that work submitted reflects the entire group and not just the literate leader. Similar programmes also exist in India, but are exclusive to women and are based at the SNDT Women's University in Bombay. This innovative approach to learning offers scope for ODL programmes offering skills training to unemployed youth in the South.

In primary health care, another Africa-based institution of equally strong influence is AMREF (African Medical and Research Foundation). Based in Kenya, its distance education unit offers a variety of primary health care programmes mainly in the eastern and southern Africa sub-region. As in the case with INADES-Formation, face-to-face contact by competent nursing officers provides the interactive support with groups of women to ensure that the essentials of the training are understood and put into effect. Also available is an online programme from Australia for the benefit of nurses working in Asia (Smith, 2000). Modalities of this kind offer approaches which have been tried and tested for possible consideration in other areas.

Programmes such as these help alleviate the lack of support or access to training, particularly for those living in remote regions (Walker, 1999). Similarly, in the formal education sector, the ICDL database reflects institutions in the developing Commonwealth which offer ODL programmes to satisfy existing, much less potential, demand for their services. In countries such as India, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Nigeria, degree and diploma programmes in law, librarianship and accountancy are always over subscribed (Bhalalusesa, 1999; Nhundu, 1999; Thomas and Ghosh, 1999). The reality is that the limited access to these TVET programmes cannot meet the demand made on the institutions but, at least, potential learners living in remote regions are being catered to, which will help reduce the crisis in education.

CONCLUSION

Development theorists tend to favour implementing programmes and policies which push human and economic activities beyond predictable levels of achievement and immediate comprehension. The possibilities of human endeavour thrive better under conditions offering challenges than in those situations where pace is either stagnant or slow. In the former context, technology “leapfrogging” offers scope to those economic environments where the challenges of globalisation are daunting and where human aspirations are not restricted by rigid parameters. In the latter context, recipients of skills acquired may have achieved limited economic empowerment, but do not appear to be able to alleviate their communities/societies from poverty. However, examples of planned programmes by INADES and AMREF are consequently being replicated throughout Africa, but their impact does not offer enough momentum to transform lives. Besides, the range of skills they provide does not offer a wide participatory level locally in TVET skills transfer.

The Asian sub-region, on the basis of factors discussed earlier, is the hallmark of economic progress and vibrancy that conforms to the challenges of globalisation. It is, therefore, not outrageous to presume that global ODL provision of TVET programmes to potential learners is within the political and economic bounds of the Asian sub-region. At the same time, there are countries in the South that could offer similar TVET programmes by ODL using less sophisticated delivery mechanisms by being equally effective for their local conditions. ODL offers enough flexibility that potential learners anywhere can benefit from TVET programmes, whether on a large scale or not (Aslam, 2000). The pre-conditions for technology “leapfrogging” seem to have a basis in economic development and regional co-operation. The African sub-region requires political stability to encourage such requirements to take hold. With that, global ODL provision of TVET programmes to potential learners would have a better prospect of becoming a reality. In any case, other ODL delivery mechanisms have proven to be as equally effective, having withstood the test of time over several generations.

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