

Foreword

The launching of this National Distance/Open Learning Policy is yet another testimony of Seychelles commitment to uphold the four basic principles relating to the terminal goals of our education programmes, namely education for empowerment, for productivity, for social cohesion and for global participation, as stated in our Education Policy Document (Education for a Learning Society).

Now that we are in the process of consolidating our comprehensive education system that caters for the majority of the population, it is also time to look for new avenues to expand learning opportunities and provisions for higher and further education. To this end, therefore, The Ministry of Education and Youth has found it necessary to move towards a mode of provision that opens access to quality higher education and training programmes at a reduced cost.

Distance/open learning is driven by the vision of promoting the fundamental right of learning for all. This Distance/Open Learning Policy, therefore, is testimony of our commitment to this vision and will be instrumental in ensuring a structured, harmonised and synchronised approach to distance and open learning programmes at the national level.

Based on our experiences of distance/open learning from working with institutions such as Edith Cowan University (Australia), Indira Gandhi National Open University (India), University of South Africa - UNISA (South Africa) and Trois Rivieres (Canada), I am convinced that the distance/open learning mode has a lot of potential to become an integral part of the Seychelles education system. Indeed, for a small island state like Seychelles , which already has in place a good telecommunication system, a technology-driven approach to teaching and learning offers made available to the centre and the institutions in the network. Once established, the centre will also seek the support of donor organisations.

INTRODUCTION

The Seychelles has an education system based on the philosophy of 'inclusion' and 'equity of access' and these basic tenets are remarkably upheld through the comprehensive education system in place. The formal system caters for a large majority of the population, whilst the other settings within the different Ministries, Institutions, Organisations and among Individuals tend to expand the learning opportunities to supplement the former. Nonetheless, opportunities and provisions for higher and further education remain limited, competitive and selective. Modes of learning, usually termed 'Open' and 'Distance' learning are not new to the Seychelles and they have been rather widespread though never fully conceptualised.

In this policy document, Open Learning (OL) is interpreted as characteristics that enable learners to learn when, how and what they want/need (Cunningham, 1987) and is viewed as a philosophy of education of 'choice', 'flexibility' and 'access' (Holdberg, 1989).

Distance Education (DE) is interpreted as "a system and a process that connects learners with distributed learning resources" (Sullivan and Rocco, 1996, p.1 as quoted Danley and Fetzner, 1997, p.1) and is viewed as a mode of education and as a way of achieving OL.

The term Open and Distance learning or ODL will be used in this policy document. ODL combines features of both distance and open learning and are not merely means of achieving a national outreach mission or as 'quick-fix' solutions to one's education limitations and inadequacies. Above all, it enables one to utilise technologies to internationalised teaching and learning and students' productivity within the context of the global economy.

RATIONALE

Seychelles has experienced a variety of teaching/learning modes, and those of 'open' learning have been widely used, particularly, in the form of in-service, part-time, training/employment schemes, adult/evening classes, literacy programmes and other social/support

services. However, the ODL strand has been often small-scale practices that went unnoticed, unexplored and under-utilised. As Walker and Murphy in their consultancy work in Seychelles, February 1998 put it: "Programmes offered by distance education have been available (usually successfully) from time to time in the Seychelles, but the concept has never really taken root, largely because ownership has always rested with the overseas host country.

A condition for distance education to become an integral part of Seychelles education system is that at least part of the system of distance education should be 'owned' locally" It is only in the past few years that a plethora of open learning, and in particular, distance learning programmes and practices are being introduced worldwide. Seychelles has seen the generation of the so-called 'correspondence' course through to the new thrusts towards 'technology-driven' teaching/learning.

In these spells, local experiences include the Trois Rivières Education Management course, the 'Maîtrise en Français', local PGCE, MBA, amongst the many others that are unlisted and/or not on records. On-going programmes are the degree in nursing with UNISA, the teacher education/management courses with Edith Cowan University, and various programmes with Surrey, IGNOU and UNISA. There may emerge other programmes through the new partnership with the Bolton Institute and the Manchester University.

THE POTENTIAL OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Since the 1960s and especially after their independence, many African countries considered open and distance learning for the following reasons:

* ODL increases access to educational opportunities for those who have job and family responsibilities and may not be able to attend an institution that requires full-time study. For example, ODL would enable practising teachers and school administrators to update and upgrade more easily and thereby allow them to remain in the classroom or school system while they were upgrading their skills. Educational materials could be sent directly to those in the schools who could use them immediately to improve instruction in the classroom.

- ODL offers an alternative, flexible means of obtaining an education; it does not have the restrictions associated with attending a traditional institution and allows students to study at home at a time that is convenient for them.
- ODL can be used to build an education system that costs less than a traditional, lecture-based education system, as large complexes of educational buildings are not required.
- ODL can rapidly provide the skilled workers and professionals that countries need in order to improve the daily lives of their citizens and their developing economies.
- ODL can meet the life-long learning needs of citizens.

CONTEXT FOR POLICY FORMULATION

Undoubtedly, there are and there will continue to be a new population of students who are not campus oriented in the traditional sense. Others are/will be at a stage of life where they will choose to study primarily at their own pace and for most part, through interactive telecommunications and computers at a wide variety of sites — their workplace, home, or other facilities in their vicinity.

The system, in its endeavour to provide education for all, continues to be hard-pressed to further expand educational opportunities and to respond to the growing demand of personal/professional skills and knowledge.

As there seems to be a national consensus on the potential and future of ODL, and a first level agreement as to their conceptualisation, institutionalisation and implementation, we unfold policy issues in the context and peculiarities of our small island states, particularly,

- * The demographic and geographic dimensions (remoteness and isolation)
- * The small economy, the rising costs against decreased public funding

- * The unavailability of a University against the exhortation 'to build our capacity to provide tertiary education/training locally
- * The need to fit the exhortation to "do more with less"
- * The wish to enhance provisions to become 'a learning society' and the increasing demand for new skills and knowledge
- * The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) potential and the connectivity
- * The need to revolutionise education at all levels both in and outside the classroom

MISSION

To provide increased access to educational opportunities that will prepare individuals to meet intellectual, economic, cultural and ethical challenges, lead full and productive lives and unlock their potential for fullest growth and development.

OBJECTIVES

- * To facilitate access to as many individuals to education and training programs in as many possible areas within an open and flexible framework.
- * To seek to provide training in open/distance modes for selected mainstream certificate and diploma courses offered by local institutions.
- * To establish strategic partnerships and liaisons with multidisciplinary education and training centres locally, in and outside the region.
- * To create a socio-educational environment in which ODL operations, methodologies and expertise find their legitimate place in the process of improving education and education opportunities in the Seychelles .

- * To establish cost effective education methodologies that use distance teaching techniques to reach the people on the different islands, in workplaces and in homes.
- * To maximise the development and delivery of educational programs and training in response to the growing demand for personal and professional development.
- * To expand awareness of distance education methods and technologies as viable education vehicles.
- * To develop our own local open/distance learning systems as an alternative mode of teaching and learning.

THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

This document provides policy recommendations at National Level. Respective institutions will view their development and operational policies within this broad context of jurisdiction. The guiding principles for the policy framework are organised in four major categories covering the essential domains of Open and Distance Learning. These are: -

1. Plans and Programmes
2. Student Support/Services
3. Fees and Student Enrolments
4. Institutional Issues

1.0 PLANS AND PROGRAMMES

The open and distance learning activities are supervised and co-ordinated by the National Vocational Training Board (NVTB). The decisions of the Board are implemented by the ODL centre within the Ministry of Education.

1.1 ROLE OF THE CENTRE

The role of the ODL centre is to manage and coordinate the implementation of ODL

programmes in all the respective institutions. The centre will ensure that proper guidelines are established for all the major areas listed in the policy framework to ensure effective implementation of programmes.

1.2 NATIONAL PLAN FOR ODL

The Open and Distance Learning centre in concert with the recognised institutions oversees the development of the state- wide plan for the delivery of Open and Distance learning programs and services. The plan is approved by NVTB and implemented by selected institutions.

This process will also ensure an increased sharing of educational resources, consistency, and coherence in all deliberations. DE becomes an organised programme which is viable and falls within the national framework of education, training and manpower development.

1.3 NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The centre works closely with the recognised institutions in the co-ordination of the national needs assessment that are eventually used in the planning for distance learning programmes and services.

This whole process of needs assessment essentially helps to identify educational resources that are most needed for the system and avoid duplication of efforts and practices. Relevant curricular needs as well as realistic forms of delivery of programmes are ensured.

1.4 PROGRAMME PRIORITY

In line with the national education/training and manpower development policy framework, the centre in concert with other institutions continuously establishes the programme priority areas for distance learning, based on the national needs. Institutions may initiate the distance learning modes for particular local programmes depending on students' demands and the institutional resource capacity to deliver the proposed programmes.

1.5 QUALITY AND STANDARDS

1.5.1 QUALITY CRITERIA

ODL programmes should result in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigour and breadth of the qualifications awarded. Programmers should be coherent, comprehensive, and developed/adapted with appropriate pedagogical rationale. Each programme should provide for significant interaction, whether real time or delayed interaction between institutions and students as well as among students.

Institutions have to ensure that the technical standards and requirements of all courses are established and maintained.

1.5.2 INSTITUTIONAL/SYSTEM EVALUATION

As part of the 'Quality Assessment' process, the institutions offering the programme should evaluate the programme's delivery including assessments of learning outcomes and student and faculty satisfaction. The institutions will provide the respective audit reports to the centre who should, in turn, provide national accountability.

1.6 PROGRAMME SUPPORT SERVICES

Institutions providing distance learning programmes should have the appropriate faculty and student support services for teaching and learning, including the electronic services.

1.7 BUSINESS/INDUSTRY PROGRAMMES

ODL programmes may be developed, adapted/adjusted for Business/Industries upon request.

Such services offer the business and industry value for money and also help them in the implementation of their human resource development plan and simultaneously bring them as partners in distance learning. These special programmes are to be offered at a rate that will reasonably cover all expenses incurred in the process.

2.1 STUDENTS SERVICES/COUNSELLING

All students should have comparable access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning. Institutions will need to develop an appropriate array of student services for the distance learner and clear agreements about who provides what services to ensure their availability. These include information about the programme, curriculum content, certificate/degree requirements, and other technical and administrative services.

Above all, respective institutions are to be responsible for the full range of advising and counselling services of the distance learners. Clear structures and trained personnel are required for that purpose. Provisions for students with disabilities will need to be developed.

2.2 CENTRES FOR PROGRAMME DELIVERY

Only designated centres are to deliver the programmes. These Centres will have the necessary facilities to support course delivery. To facilitate the outreach to all islands, some 'Send' and 'Receive' sites will be established and supported. The Commission will ensure the development of compatible and comparable resources, services and procedures across 'send' and 'receive' sites including hardware/software and technical support

2.3 LIBRARY SERVICES

Institutions are to ensure that appropriate library services be made available to distance learning students. Library must be appropriately resourced and updated, as good library services are central to the success of any distance learning programme. Organised access to the library outside the normal working days and hours is an important consideration for the recognised institutions.

2.4 COMPUTER LITERACY PREREQUISITES

Students are encouraged to have the basic computer requirements prior to joining a course. Still, institutions are expected to develop computer literacy programmes for the distance learning students, or guide them to available computer literacy programmes, that provide the prerequisites students need to access distance learning programmes/courses.

2.5 REQUIREMENT FOR ADMISSION

Entry criteria for admission to an institution and admission on a specific programme must be respected. Students will only be granted admission when all technical, administrative and educational requirements are satisfactorily met.

2.6 CO-MINGLING OF COURSES

Institutions should develop procedures that permit the co-mingling of courses/programmes from on- and off-campus units, regardless of the source of registration so that student may take advantage of all offerings.

FEES AND STUDENTS ENROLMENTS

3.1 TUITION FEES

An important principle behind the development and implementation of distance education/learning is the economic advantages in terms of training costs. The tuition fees

should be consistent with the tuition fee policies for other forms of training, be it local or overseas.

3.2 STUDENT ENROLMENTS

Normal enrolment procedures will apply to all students. Local institutions will not offer or enrol students on courses that lack local expertise and support personnel, and are not national priorities.

4.1 PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

Institutions will have a training plan that ensures appropriate training of staff. The latter must demonstrate their commitments and competence in how to use the new technologies to effectively teach on-campus and off-site students. Local on-site training should take precedence as it has the advantage of providing familiarity with on-campus equipment and facilities. Furthermore, a bigger pool of local people would benefit from this option.

4.2 REMUNERATION FOR STAFF

Since many of the instructional staff will be on a part-time basis while holding other responsibilities, respective institutions will reward their additional effort, accordingly. The existing policy for institutions will apply.

4.3 COPYRIGHT AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

Institutions have to respect all local/international copy rights and property rights as to the use of technologies and the use of course materials.

4.4 PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

Institutions are responsible for the sourcing, adaptation/adjustment/adoption of programmes as well as the development and effective delivery of all courses under their jurisdiction. The most efficient and effective technology and distance learning systems and methods should be used. They must also ensure satisfactory students performance and progress.

5.1 INVESTMENT IN HUMAN RESOURCES

Managing and evaluating distance learning programmes requires a thorough understanding of the specific needs of this type of learning. People who will be employed to work in the Centre will receive specialised training for them to be able to lead the implementation of ODL in the respective institutions.

5.2 TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT

Open/distance learning relies on technology, be it radio, TV, networks, the Internet or a stand-alone computer - O/DL uses mail whether it be of the conventional kind or of the electronic kind. Seychelles is already well developed in these areas; it will only be necessary to devise ways to add to and maximise utilisation of existing facilities.

5.3 DESIGN OF LOCAL COURSES

As a mid-term perspective, it would be worthwhile to consider adapting established local courses which are in great demand, to be offered on a O/DL basis. Consideration will also be given to the design of new O/DL courses that could be offered both locally and regionally. To start this venture, it will be necessary to rely on consultants from elsewhere.

5.4 FUNDING

As with any education related project, O/DL must be seen as a slow-growth 'industry' where rewards are seldom immediately visible. To keep the momentum of its progress, it is nonetheless necessary to maintain a consistent level of investment - despite the lack of instant benefits.

Local funding (to be determined by the NVTB) should be made available to the center and the institutions in the network. Once established, the center will also seek the support of donor organizations.

6.0 FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

For ODL to be successful, it is important that innovation and development take place within a proper policy framework supported by clear guiding principles and processes. The policy document for ODL provides a comprehensive, conceptual and flexible framework so as to accommodate our constantly evolving society and pave the way ahead for institutionalised policies and development.

ODL has to become an integral part of the education and training system for it to be effective.