

Open and Distance Learning in Papua New Guinea: Case Study of a Private Training Provider

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Abstract

This paper conceptualises open and distance learning as a *movement* for developing a critical mass of people, indispensable for a variety of national, personal, developmental and enrichment endeavours. The question of *mutual relevance* and *mutual response* of open and distance learning brings to critical focus the tasks of maintaining and sustaining quality assurance of open and distance learning programs in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The expansion of educational and learning opportunities presented by open and distance learning in PNG has led to challenges for providers relating to curriculum development, with specific reference to adequate teaching and learning material preparation and distribution to learners. Against that background, this paper provides a case study on how the Professional Staff Training College in PNG has fared since the inception of its international diploma and certificate programs via open and distance learning.

Key words: open and distance learning, soft systems method, private training provider, mutual relevance, mutual response, market segmentation, customers, technology, competition, product differentiation, real world thinking, systems thinking

Introduction

This paper attempts to fill a knowledge gap, of which it has three specific aims to fulfil. Firstly, this paper provides an overview of variables affecting open and distance learning using the experiences of the Professional Staff Training College as a private training provider in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Secondly, an attempt is made to address how research affects the best practices of open and distance learning in the context of national development. Thirdly, this paper provides a critique of open and distance learning in PNG by reviewing whether it is of *mutual relevance* or *mutual response* to the developmental needs of the country.

To elaborate more on some of the key variables affecting open and distance learning, on the part of the Professional Staff Training College, it is quite useful to analyse these within a conceptual framework of three basic economic questions from the standpoint of decisions to be made in the PNG context and more specifically, from the standpoint of the Professional Staff Training College, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. A Conceptual framework

Economic questions	Economic decisions
1. What goods and services should be produced?	1. The product decision
2. How should these goods and services be produced?	2. The hiring, staffing, procurement, and capital-budgeting decisions
3. For whom should these goods and services be produced?	3. The market segmentation decision

After Keat & Young (2000:11), cited in Laufa (2006b)

Economic questions and decisions from the standpoint of the Professional Staff Training College in the PNG context

Using the conceptual framework, this paper looks at the three questions and how they form the basis of economic decisions from the standpoint of the Professional Staff Training College in the Papua New Guinea context.

What goods and services are produced by the Professional Staff Training College involves its planning, preparation and production of open and distance learning educational materials in exchange for tuition fees as its main traditional component of income. This may change when the college expands and decides to offer a diversity of services other than open and distance learning services. Based on recent discussions, it has been established that the Professional Staff Training College has plans to expand its business operations by opening a regional head office in Cairns, Australia, to better serve Southeast Asia and Pacific island countries from a more geographically central location. A strategic alliance with the Blessed Hope Ministry, a faith-based open and distance learning educational service provider, will be formalised in 2009. Meanwhile the Port Moresby office serves as an affiliate office under its brand name of the Professional Staff Training College, whilst the regional head office will assume the name, Blessed Hope Ministry (Laeka, 2008).

How goods and services of the Professional Staff Training College are produced is part of a manager's responsibility. It involves personnel practices such as staff recruitment and induction, as well as the purchase of training materials and capital equipment. For example, the decision to automate certain clerical activities such as database storage and retrieval using networked computers in a WAN or LAN mode results in a more capital-intensive mode of production. The executive's resolution to hire more supplementary, part-time trainers, rather than employ full-time trainers to facilitate its various business and management programs offered through open and distance learning, is another example of a management decision affecting how goods and services can be produced and delivered.

For whom should the goods and services of the Professional Staff Training College be produced, requires decisions about what markets to target. Laufa (2006b, after Keat and Young 2000), emphasises that a firm's decision on clients to focus on is not completely analogous to that of a country and that a

firm's decision regarding *market segmentation* (a term used in the marketing field) is closely related to what goods and services a firm plans to produce.

In deciding what segment of the market to focus on, the Professional Staff Training College is not literally deciding who gets its educational services. For instance, the Professional Staff Training College decided to target two categorised groups of prospective customers. They are the 'working class' people and 'school leavers' (students who have completed grade ten and grade twelve), who may wish to acquire further qualifications and professional training in business and management practices. This would enhance their chances of being employable in the private or public sector.

As the Professional Staff Training College is a commercial enterprise, management decisions are needed in regard to how prospective students will pay their tuition fees. The Professional Staff Training College offers three options: (a) full fee payment, (b) instalment payments through salary deductions authority, and (3) through establishing a standing order authority with a commercial bank. The tuition fees options indicate how a trainee could manage learning while earning within the confines of their own disposable incomes. The twenty-six (26 fortnightly instalment option) appears to be more affordable for the trainees. Fee payment options and distribution policies make certain segments of the market more likely to enrol in a training program offered by the college.

All of this is summed up in the business philosophy of the Professional Staff Training College – *More Convenience, More Support and More Affordable to be first in PNG*. Guided by this philosophy the college has established itself as a leading private open and distance learning service provider in PNG.

The three basic economic questions of relevance for open and distance learning can be summarised in the following manner:

- ✓ Firstly: What to produce for open and distance learning educational services and in what quantities
- ✓ Secondly: For whom to produce open and distance learning educational goods and services
- ✓ Thirdly: How to produce open and distance learning goods and services through teaching, learning and material preparation and the subsequent distribution of materials and services to learners/trainees.

From a national standpoint, these three basic economic questions can be applied to critically analyse different variables affecting open and distance learning in a holistic manner. From a firm's point of view, it is quite useful to analyse how these variables determine the Professional Staff Training College's role as a private training provider. This involves a close examination of the economics of the open and distance learning business in PNG. A realistic assessment of the *status quo* of open and distance learning could be captured in this way.

Economics of the open and distance learning business in PNG

The economics of open and distance learning business in PNG can be usefully analysed within the context of three factors: (a) customers, (b) technology and (c) competition. The Professional Staff Training College has been mindful of the fact that in operating and maintaining a private training providing business in PNG, it is essentially dealing with *customers* (current and prospecting trainees), *technology* (computers, facsimile, telephone) and it is inevitably facing a very stiff *competition* from other training providers in the country. This intense wave of competition is coming from public sector providers such as: the University of Papua New Guinea Open College, Divine Word University Faculty of Flexible Learning and the Papua New Guinea University of Technology Department of Distance Education.

An observation made at this juncture is that the established public tertiary institutions appear to be expending huge amounts of cost, time and effort in instructional design to develop and produce their own teaching and learning materials. In this regard, the Professional Staff Training College feels that it has a competitive edge and a comparative advantage over institutions developing their own materials by readily having its franchised materials of international quality from the Cambridge International College.

Customers

The Professional Staff Training College's customers (prospecting trainees and currently enrolled trainees) are largely determined by the following factors which are explained separately.

Programs of the Professional Staff Training College are structured around three fourteen week trimesters with three enrolments annually. This means that enrolments are increasing by the trimester. The Professional Staff Training College started its first trimester in August 2005 with an enrolment of 120 trainees. By 26 January 2006, trainee enrolment stood at 480 and the number is projected to increase in the coming trimesters.

Through its franchise agreement with Cambridge International College of Jersey in the United Kingdom, signed in June 2004, the Professional Staff Training College is an affiliate of the Cambridge International College. The franchise agreement between the Cambridge International College and the Professional Staff Training College was last reviewed in June 2006 and has been renewed with exclusivity rights, wherein the latter has rights to market open and distance learning products (training manuals) in other nearby countries such as Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, parts of Sri Lanka and the Philippines as well (Laeka 2006).

The PNG Professional Staff Training College offers international diploma and certificate programs via open and distance learning, using materials from the Cambridge International College in the United Kingdom. This is attractive to some customers who prefer to gain an international qualification, without the

expense of doing the program in an overseas location. The Cambridge International College owns the two training manuals, each having six modules, and sets the final examination at the end of the 12-month-period. The Professional Staff Training College administers student enrolment and sets internal assessment for the trainees. The international diploma programs are therefore based on satisfactory completion of twelve modules, with students sitting a mid-term test and an end of training examination.

Technology

The Professional Staff Training College currently operates in a modern well furnished office complex located on Level 2 of Burns House in Champion Parade, in downtown area of Port Moresby. With the office set up, there are vibrant training rooms fitted with computer terminals, offering interactive multi-media facilities. The current short-term training programs are benefiting from these facilities.

Looking at the progressive rate of trainee enrolment, the Professional Staff Training College is now embarking on E-Commerce to have its own homepage to offer a variety of services (e.g. downloadable application forms) for its prospecting customers. It has also opened up an Internet cafeteria that is now catering for ICT needs for people in the nation's capital, apart from its core business function of providing open and distance learning educational services (Laeka 2006, cited in Laufa 2006b).

Competition

Without question, training providers in the open and distance learning sector are in competition with one another, and this is where 'product differentiation' and marketing strategies will influence the share of the market that each institution can attract. This has made it increasingly necessary for training providers to spend thousands of kina from their budgets on marketing and advertising their programs.

Marketing and advertising through media outlets such as Yumi FM, Kalang Radio FM 100, *The National* and *Post-Courier* newspapers, have assumed critical roles in the open and distance learning business. The Professional Staff Training College's advertising budget is driven by an aggressive marketing strategy that was spearheaded by the Executive Director and his enthusiastic marketing team and this has been received with a resounding success with enrolment figures rising steadily over a two-year-period (Laeka, 2008).

Over twelve thousand flyers were distributed via post office boxes in early 2006. This was later proactively followed through by regular advertisements in the national daily newspapers. To keep abreast with the competition from other providers in the open and distance learning sector, new training consultants were also recruited through placing advertisements in the newspapers so as to meet the growing demands of trainees enrolled in the various international career progress diploma programs (Laeka, 2008).

Research and best practice of the Professional Staff Training College in the open and distance learning training business

Research

For the purpose of using research findings to develop best practices, the Professional Staff Training College administers questionnaire surveys intermittently to gain data to help make decisions concerning further development and areas for improvement. Student services is one area that is continually assessed and monitored particularly in regard to assignment setting, marking and delivery.

The Professional Staff Training College was diligent in ensuring that its academic policies regarding open and distance learning practices were developed on the basis and rationale of research outcomes (Laufa 2006a). In a previous study, it was observed that research based policies facilitated standards and quality cognizant with internationally recognized best practices for institutions in the open and distance learning business (Laufa 2006b).

The Professional Staff Training College uses its findings from training and research surveys to improve and consolidate its position as a leading private training provider. The items focus on teaching, learning and the environment in which the teaching and learning take place. Research results of the surveys are then used to tap strategically into the open and distance learning markets within the country.

The market surveys and opinion polls contribute a lot to developing specific products and fee structures for different target groups that the Professional Staff Training College enter into with a Memorandum of Understanding, be it in the public or private sector. For example, in September of 2007, the Professional Staff Training College entered into a promotional campaign with Nambawan Super Limited with a special trimester offer to lure working class (mainly public servants) affiliated with the company.

In a limited time offer, many public servants throughout the country, who were contributors to Nambawan Super Limited, took advantage of the special offer and enrolled in various diploma training programs in business and management (Laeka 2008). People enrolled and became fortnightly contributors to the Professional Staff Training College and were able to benefit from its open and distance learning products.

Best practice

To align with best practices, the Professional Staff Training College has been providing *quality assurance* to its stakeholders through affiliation and accreditation processes. The Professional Staff Training College has affiliated with National Training Council for its certificate programs. The Professional Staff Training College has affiliated with the Cambridge International College

in the United Kingdom for its international diploma programs in business and management.

The Professional Staff Training College is now in the process of seeking recognition of its programs by the Office of Higher Education. At this critical juncture and in terms of its business promotion and development, the Professional Staff Training College is required to apply to the Office of Higher Education for accreditation of its programs and cannot opt for institutional accreditation, which can be done only by those institutions that are established by an Act of Parliament. For the Professional Staff Training College to obtain institutional accreditation, it will need to affiliate with an existing tertiary institution that has been established by an Act of Parliament.

Equally important, the Professional Staff Training College has subjected itself to an evaluation exercise under the direction of a seven-member steering committee co-opted by the Executive Director. This was done to comply with the accreditation policy of the Commission of Higher Education. This is an evaluative, on-going process and is in the best interest of all stakeholders of open and distance learning in PNG, to maintain and sustain quality assurance of academic programs (cf. *The National*, 28 August 2005; cited in Laufa 2006b).

A critique of open and distance learning in PNG

Critiquing open and distance learning in PNG has several dimensions and issues to consider, of which three tentative research questions can be raised for the purposes of investigating the issues. The questions explored were:

- (1) Is open and distance learning a movement?
- (2) Does open and distance learning reflect mutual relevance and mutual response factors (of which the former has broader interpretation and the latter has more specific interpretation) tied to specified activities within the teaching-learning continuum?
- (3) Does open and distance learning provide the logical and epistemological basis for the expansion of educational and learning opportunities in Papua New Guinea?

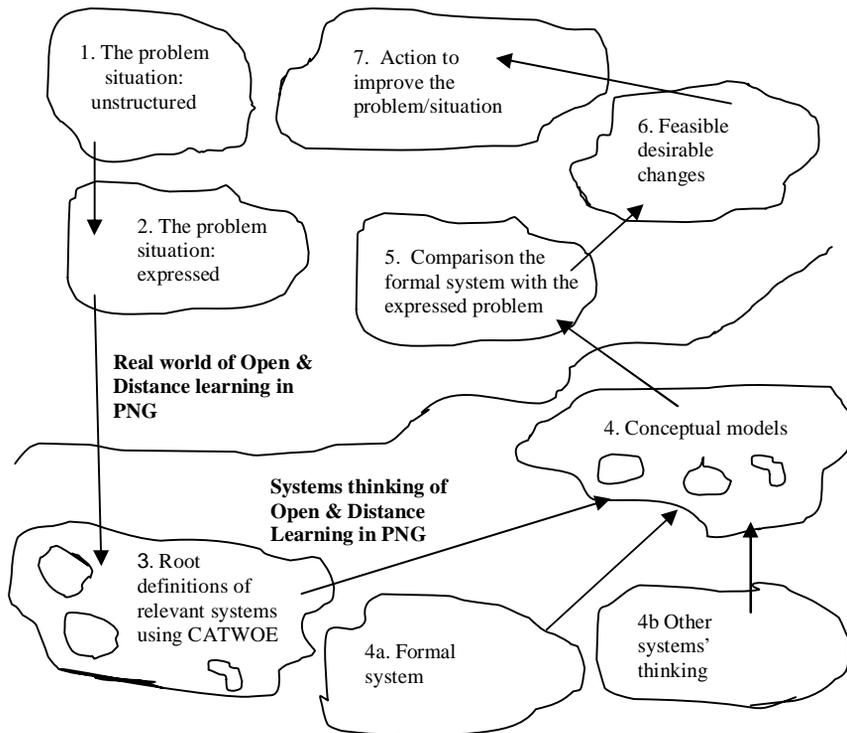
Open and distance learning: Is it a movement?

In this paper, it is argued that open and distance education is indeed a movement. It is a series of actions or activities directed towards achieving a particular end. It is a course or trend of affairs in the field of education to offer an alternative to full-time study with an educational institution. Open and distance learning draws its inner strength and character from a predetermined set of principles and perceptions that education is one of the most basic fundamental aspects of human rights and fundamental freedoms. While this study does not discuss these rights and freedoms at any length, it does however state at a level of generality that they differ on the moral principles and legal implications for many different cultural and economic groups of people. Open and distance learning responds to social justice issues by providing

opportunities for people to be educated and upgrade their skills or qualifications when circumstances prevent them from being full-time students.

From a pedagogical standpoint, learning through open and distance learning cannot operate in a social vacuum. The social context involves three key interrelated factors: the learner, the teacher and the learning environment. The three interrelated factors can be critically evaluated and synthesised using the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) model. The SSM method will be applied along the action research method as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A sketch of soft systems methodology



(after Checkland 1999)

From the Soft Systems Methodology model, the following can be deduced for the purposes of narrowing the scope of the problem situations of open and distance learning in Papua New Guinea, of which if it is discussed in the real world, is more or less unstructured. Premised on this condition, the SSM adopts steps one, two, five, six and seven as issues pertinent with *real world thinking*, whilst steps three and four and with additional steps attached to step four reflect *systems thinking* as an approach to problem solving to specific open and distance learning problems.

To think in terms of systems as an approach to resolve any existing constraints within open and distance learning as a mode of production for educational services, root considerations about the system are explored using: Customer, Actor, Transformation, Weltanschauung, Owner and Environmental questions (CATWOE).

Customers:	Who would be victims or beneficiaries of this system were it to exist?
Actors:	Who would carry out the activities of this system?
Transformation process:	What input is transformed into what output by this system?
Weltanschauung:	What image of the world makes this system meaningful?
Owner:	Who could abolish this system?
Environmental constraints:	What external constraints does this system take as given?

Exploring answers to the questions identified within this constraint framework enhances problem learning and appreciation of managerial solutions. Checkland (1999) has been credited with promoting systems ideas and concepts over a period of three decades and he has further refined soft systems methodology as a credible analytical tool for use in management thinking and applications in a whole plethora of situations in everyday life. The use of soft systems methodology captures and reflects the managerial situation of open and distance learning as an alternative mode of education services. This paper argues that periodic reviewing of the management of open and distance learning programs in Papua New Guinea through the application of soft systems methodology would benefit all stakeholders within this subsystem of education.

The open and distance learning movement, from its epistemological grounds serves to reinforce our understanding that, as a process, it operates on the assumption that such a movement ultimately leads to effectively developing a critical mass of people, who are by no means alienated by social status, or socio-economic background. Making that critical distinction clear would facilitate effective understanding of an alternative mode of production for educational services in PNG. The nature of education in PNG as a social subsystem has been reduced to an economic category. Open and distance learning is part and parcel of the overall educational system, albeit with considerations for cost effective and learner-user-friendly alignments that are sharply contrasted with that of the traditional face-to-face educational establishments in the country.

‘Mutual relevance’ and ‘mutual response’ regarding open and distance learning and human resource development in PNG

The word ‘mutual’ refers to common interactions or purposes pertaining to two or more groups. *Mutual relevance* refers to institutional programs being

relevant to people's needs and people perceiving that the programs on offer are indeed relevant to their needs. *Mutual response* refers to institutions responding to people's needs by providing suitable programs and people responding to institutional offerings by enrolling in such programs. The broader interpretation of open and distance learning is that it has practical implications for human resource development in the country and, thus ultimately serves to reinforce our understanding of *mutual relevance* to the wider development processes in PNG, and mirrors the undertakings and reflections made in the National Education Plan 2005-2014. Open and distance learning providers have a moral duty to ensure that quality assurance processes, pertaining to standards and relevance are jealously safeguarded, maintained and sustained at all costs.

By ensuring the relevance of programs, open and distance learning providers are adopting a *mutual response* position to human resource development in PNG. This *mutual response* position, on the other side of the coin, implies that the public and private sector see the programs as relevant to their human resource development needs and respond by taking advantage of open and distance learning opportunities in the country.

At this critical juncture, it is still unclear as to whether there is mutual understanding between organisations offering open and distance learning programs and the government, through its Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology. The question is whether or not the National Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee should adopt a separate and specific set of policy guidelines for open and distance learning in PNG to those that exist non-commercial educational enterprises. As an issue of quality assurance for people enrolling in open and distance learning and to prevent unworthy groups exploiting Papua New Guineans, it is vital that there needs to be a national control mechanism for regulating this sub-system of education. Thus, a big question emanating from this analysis of open and distance learning is, how can the government of the day through the Ministry concerned regulate and promote a legitimate, user-friendly and effective open and distance learning system that is relevant to the human resource development needs of PNG?

Conclusion

Three tentative conclusions can be drawn from this study. Firstly, the Professional Staff Training College, whilst being driven by profit just like any business entity, has the noble intention of improving and enhancing its outreach efforts to provide high quality, relevant products and services to students enrolling in its programs. To support these efforts, future research surveys will focus on at least three essential factors that affect the teaching-learning continuum: academic qualifications, experiences and motivational aspects of teachers and learners in open and distance learning. Secondly, further empirical investigation and more detailed studies are needed into issues raised in this paper. It has been argued that the use of the soft systems methodology provides a tool for exploring policy and practices of open and distance learning in Papua New Guinea. The need exists for further research in

open and distance learning as a human resource development activity, to capture a broad mix of issues that need filtering and aligning to enhance this subsystem of education in PNG. Thirdly, the enactment by government of a separate, enabling and more specific piece of legislation for open and distance learning would inevitably provide the ground rules and regulatory control mechanisms for the mutual benefit of both learners and practitioners alike. In doing so, the study anticipates that this would firmly embrace the culture of mutual relevance and mutual response to open and distance learning as a subsystem of education in the country.

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