

## Contribution 2

Country case study- Distance Education in Mauritius

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## Introduction

This paper describes the distance education (DE) and open learning (OL) scenario in Mauritius. It provides a historical background to the development of open and distance learning and delineates the rationale for its provision in the local and regional markets by some figures related to provision on specific organizations and the private providers. It goes on to give a broadbrush picture of the key concerns of the Mauritian educational landscape, discusses the policy situation and provides some points regarding the future of open and distance learning in Mauritius.

## Contextualizing DE in Mauritius

DE is planned learning that occurs in a different place from where teaching is being carried out. It requires special course design, instructional techniques, communication media and technology, organizational as well as administrative arrangements. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is an amalgam of two approaches to forms of education that focus on expanding access to learning<sup>1</sup>. It is characterized by its philosophy and its use of technology. It involves planned learning that occurs in a different place from where teaching is being carried out. It requires special course design, instructional techniques methods, communication media and technology, organizational as well as administrative arrangements<sup>2</sup>. ODL has caused paradigm shifts that have extended boundaries of conventional education and revisited concepts of accessibility, flexibility, and convenience. The flexibility offered by distance education is what will make the concept of lifelong education a lived reality for most working people. Flexibility – the ability to work at one’s pace and at one’s convenience – is the key to the successful outcome of individual learning endeavors. Research increasingly reports how technology – enhanced DE accentuates the element of flexibility that is so crucial to learning in today’s hectic world.

DE is the fastest growing area of education worldwide. It heralds a major breakthrough in the quality of course provision in the foreseeable future. Already, more

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<sup>1</sup> Freeman, R. (2004). *Planning and implementing open and distance learning systems- A handbook for decision makers*. Canada: COL

<sup>2</sup> Moore, M.G. and Kearsley, G.(1996). *Distance Education: A systems view*. USA: Wadsworth Publishing

than one thousand DE institutions in over a hundred countries are offering not less than 38,000 different courses.

In Mauritius, early forms of DE using correspondence courses can be traced as far back as 1865 when students took the London University external examinations locally. At the time of the setting up of the Open University, UK, in 1971, the creation of the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) heralded institutional provision of DE in the country. Self-taught correspondence courses produced by the MCA course teams and supplemented by face to face sessions or occasionally by audio-visual programmes were used for academic and professional training. At that time print, radio and television were used extensively not only for DE for adults but also some form of unstructured open schooling by supplementing primary and secondary school curricula. When the MCA was reorganized in the mid-70s, DE became a non-priority area for more than two decades.

The end of the 80s witnessed a timid revival of DE within the framework of consultations leading to the preparation of the Master Plan of Education for year 2000 and beyond. Subsequently, reports by Donald Chesworth (1989), John Daniel (1989) and Michael Young (1989) identified priority areas where the potential of ODL could be optimised: upgrading of teacher qualifications, foreign language teaching, language for specific purposes and professional training and retraining in the public sector. (In fact the setting up of a Language Institute to address the above is being considered)

In the wake of the above reports, in the early 1990s, DE gained more importance during educational planning in the Tertiary Education Sector with the recognition that it could be a useful instrument for the following:

- Increased access to education and skills for new groups such as working people, housewives and school drop-outs;
- Improved academic and professional qualifications of teachers and students
- Socio-economically relevant programmes for vocational and professional training
- Adult and continuing education engaged in lifelong learning pursuits.

In 1993-1994 two surveys were conducted by TEC to ascertain the interest of unemployed women and housewives and of unemployed/employed/self-employed professionals, technicians, clerks and managers in further studies/training through ODL.

The results of the studies highlighted the interest of professionals, technicians, managers and clerks in Management, Science, Social Sciences & Humanities, Engineering & Agriculture, and that of the unemployed women and housewives, in Dress Design, European Languages, Computer, Health, Nutrition, Cookery, Child Care & Parenting. The outcome of the survey has contributed in some measure in planning ODL provision in the Tertiary Education Sector but the proposed systemic approach, at a national level involving all tertiary education institutions which would specialize in components of DE provision was not unanimously adopted.

After a rather unsystematic and incoherent start that was encouraged and compounded by a lack of operational policy framework, the target market for DE is being redefined. It seems to be narrowing down to two specific and rather sophisticated niches: undergraduates and working professionals. The various public local institutions that offer DE courses in Mauritius are in the process of securing their particular niche market and have started finally demonstrating a willingness to collaborate on an inter-institutional basis. These are namely, the MCA, the University of Mauritius (UoM) and the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE). These are still functioning in the absence of a recognized policy framework.

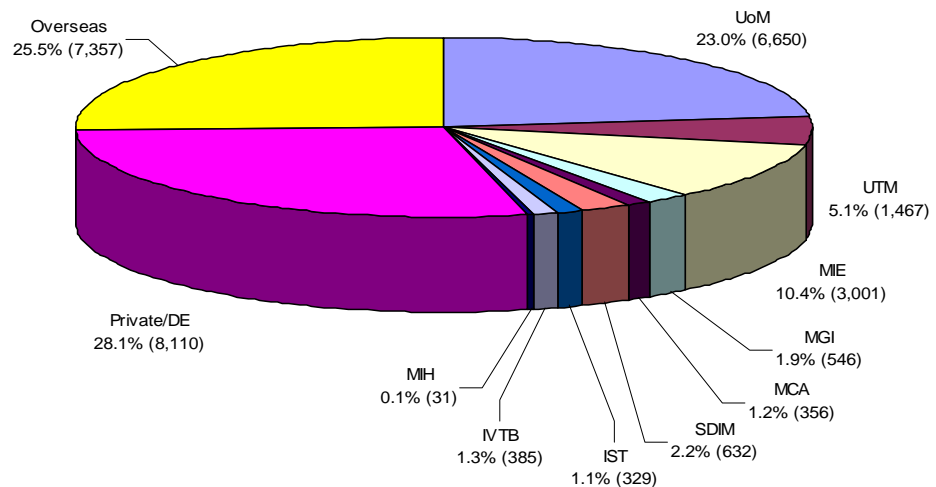
## **2. Overall Participation in 2005 – The Mauritian Scenario**

As is the case globally, ODL is gaining popularity and momentum in Mauritius. This is evidenced by the increasing number of providers of ODL courses as well as consumers of ODL initiatives. ODL represents a significant share of educational initiatives in the country. Market forces have made it necessary for individuals from all walks of life to join the current of lifelong learning. In Mauritius the growth of ODL is challenging as well as promising.

The main thrust of DE interventions in Mauritius is in the higher education sector. The tertiary student population is estimated at around 28,864 in December, 2005 compared with 26,074 a year earlier, representing a growth rate of nearly 10.7% over the period. The Gross Tertiary Enrolment Rate, accordingly, worked out at 28.4% in 2005, up from 24.2% in 2004. Figure 1 gives the distribution of the tertiary student population by source, laying particular emphasis on the Publicly Funded Institutions. As can be

noted, the UoM with 23.0% of students dominated the tertiary education scene locally, followed by the MIE (10.4%), the Polytechnics (4.7%), the University of Technology, Mauritius (UTM) (5.1%), the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) (1.9%), the Industrial and Vocational Training Board (IVTB) (2.9%), the MCA (2.7%) and the Mauritius Institute of Health (MIH) (0.1%) (TEC, 2005).

**Figure 1: Distribution of Tertiary Enrolment by Source, 2005**



Source: TEC 2005

### 3.0 Sectors involved in DE provision

#### 3.1 *The Mauritius College of the Air*

The MCA is the national audio-visual educational production house whose objective is, *inter alia*, to improve access to education through the development of a distance education capacity. It houses a Division of Distance Education. The MCA is the only dedicated DE public institution. While it is considered as a tertiary education institution, its mandate does not allow it to award degrees. It provides most of its courses in collaborative arrangements with local and foreign institutions. At present (as at June 2006) it has about 646 students who are distributed among 18 courses provided at non-award level, certificate, diploma, degree and postgraduate levels.

### **3.2 *The Mauritius Institute of Education***

The MIE, a dual-mode institution was established in 1978 while the formal DE courses were initiated in 1993 when Centre for Distance Education was established. All DE courses consist of printed course materials, course booklets. In some modules audio-visual aides are available. There are no computer-based resources except for the IGNOU/MIE collaboration where email communication between student/teacher is possible. On all programmes learners are offered monthly face-to-face sessions. The total number of enrollees for DE exclusive of its face to face provision, at the MIE for the year 2005/2006 was as follows: 1,069 for the Teacher's Diploma (Primary) in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi National Open University; 41 for the Advanced Certificate in Education and 352 for the Certificate in Educational Management.

### **3.3 *The University of Mauritius***

The UoM is a dual mode institution. Its DE wings are very active (<http://www.uom.ac.mu/>). These are the Center for Professional Development and Lifelong Learning (CPDL) and the Virtual Centre for Innovative Learning Technologies (VCILT) which are grouped under the Lifelong Learning Cluster.

#### **3.3.1 *The Center for Professional Development and Lifelong Learning***

The CPDL was opened in 1993. The impetus came from the need to adopt a new teaching and learning approach in certain modules, due to the inadequacy of the conventional method to fulfill the expectations of both the students and the Faculty members. In this endeavor, the UoM was backed financially, and also in terms of expertise (through the Laurentian University, Canada), by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

The CPDL was also closely involved in CAERENAD, a Canadian –funded program. Its objective was aimed at capacity building of participating institutions to enable them meet the educational and training needs of their respective population through the enrichment of their scientific and pedagogical competencies, through sharing of their scientific and pedagogical competencies and through sharing of their resources and expertise. The program involved six participating institutions from six different countries in the development of CAERENAD. These are:

- Universidad Federale de Mato Grosso, Instituto de Educaçao (BRESIL)

- Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile, Teleduc (CHILI)
- Universidad Estatal a Distancia, Escuela de Ciencias Exactas (COSTA RICA)
- Université Cheik Anta Diop, École Normale Supérieure (SENEGAL)
- University of Mauritius, Center for Distance Learning(MAURITIUS)
- Télé-Université, TELUQ (CANADA).

The mandate of CPDL has considerably broadened out to include lifelong learning with a wider spectrum of learning approaches: online, blended, face to face, executive development seminars, videoconferencing and so forth in order to meet the clients' needs.

For the years 2005/2006, the total participation in DE modules is 5696 (these are on campus students and enrolment is module-wise), while students enrolled on off-campus programmes is 196. A sample of the most successful programs on offer is as follows: a Diploma in Management Studies (with plans to top up with a B.Sc. In Management as from 2007); B.Sc. Hons. Financial Management; and M. Sc. Port Management and Shipping Administration (funded by EU and Mauritius Ports Authority- which has had no dropout so far).

### ***3.3.2 The Virtual Center for Innovative Learning Technologies***

The VCILT has been focusing on developing the online courses for the UoM. Positive feedback has been obtained, from the UoM students, as a result of many testing of the online courses and tests. The VCILT currently develops academic modules for the university and pedagogical prototype projects in line with the national ongoing effort for the promotion of ICT, continuous education and lifelong flexible learning in Mauritius. Modules and projects are accessible online to registered students and academics of the UoM. The VCILT aims to provide a complete e-learning environment.

Currently, the VCILT is also working very closely with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and has recently hosted the boot camp for the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth. It is experimenting with using Open Educational Resources for online course development and provision. It has recently launched a fully online course – the Masters in Computer Mediated Communication Pedagogies with all its course material/modules being developed locally.

### **3.4 *The private providers***

The past few years have witnessed a proliferation of a number of overseas providers operating in Mauritius. Most of the private providers (about 34) operate in collaboration with overseas institutions and use a mixture of DE and face to face tutorials in delivering courses. Students in general sit examinations under the supervision of the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate (MES). Some of these institutions make their own examination arrangements in collaboration with the overseas institutions.

The number of students following overseas-run DE courses/programmes has increased from 7,515 in 2004 to 8,110 in 2005, representing a growth of 7.9%. In 2005 the demand for programmes leading to professional training/retraining was comparatively high, for example, 34.1% students were enrolled in Accountancy and 15.5% in Computer Studies while 13.4% were following Administration/Management courses. The other fields of study attracted a relatively smaller but nonetheless significant number of students; they include Business/Commerce/Marketing 806 (9.9%), Medicine 547 (6.7%), Law – 279 (3.4%), Languages 183 (2.2%), Dentistry 158 (1.9%), Communication 135 (1.7%), Economics 131 (1.6%) and Social Science 114 (1.4%).

### **4.0 *Key concerns of the Mauritian educational landscape***

In Mauritius, as in many other countries, the main problems facing the education system are access, flexibility, quality, identification and servicing of niche markets as well as the development of contextualized and relevant policy frameworks. A well-defined policy can effectively address the above issues for personal and national development.

#### **4.1 *Increasing access and improving flexibility***

The problem of access occurs because of overload of the existing face-to-face system which is faced with increasing demand for education without a proportional increasing in capacity. The concept of lifelong education has also introduced additional pressure on the traditional face to face educational provision because people from all walks and stages of life are insistently requiring access to education for re-skilling and professional upgrading and personal development. Indeed learning and development occurs across the life-span, from cradle to grave – from learning in early childhood to learning in retirement. It is an inclusive concept that refers not only to education in



formal settings, such as schools, universities and adult education institutions, but also to “life-wide” learning in informal settings, at home, at work and in the wider community” (OECD, 1996). The face to face system is an inflexible and non-accommodating one that conflicts more often than not with personal and professional activities, responsibilities and commitments. As such it cannot really accommodate the increasing numbers of people wishing to avail themselves of educational facilities for personal or professional upgrading.

As it increases access, technology is also seen to improve flexibility. Integration of technology in educational activities is crucial and demands careful planning for optimal utilization, enhanced efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, the planning of distance learning usually involves policy issues at international, national and institutional level. The international issues arise in part because the forces of globalization are affecting the content and practices of education, in part because new policy issues arise when education is no longer confined within national barriers. Planning is highly important when making judgments about the desirability, feasibility and acceptability of internationalized ideas within individual countries (Perraton, 1998)

It is seen that there is a tendency for main policy issues to address the question of access through the development of ICTs to an increasingly large number of people. ICTs are often held as a panacea to the problem of access to education. This is not necessarily true and a stratified approach to ICT is advocated. The underlying danger in such an approach is the fact that the numbers who may be reached may be receiving *inappropriate* education that may *not* enhance personal development. The quality of such provision then becomes questionable.

Market principles are also the guiding principles in policy-making. The deregulations in financial markets, trade barriers and implementations of multinational companies everywhere in the world are causing a proportional deregulation regarding educational provision. Compounded by a lack of DE-related policy, this has created enormous problems in terms of recognition of qualifications or universities and credit

transfer. Mauritius is yet to formalize its DE provision through a sound operational policy framework.

#### **4.2 *Importance of situating the niche market***

A potentially dangerous issue that the education system at large and more specifically DE is facing is its lack of definition of a niche market. An archaic approach to DE which does not encourage learner self-directedness can cripple the future of public providers, especially when they are slow at capturing a niche market. The State needs to position providers of education strategically in the marketplace. It should provide guidelines to help them make conscious choices and trade-offs based upon their missions and abilities.

To better serve its learners, any organization should change its operations; look anew at its instructional design, and the provision of support services. In addition, it should revamp its present staff development projects, and staff deployment, especially the training of online instructors, and instructional designers, and should provide a range of incentives to encourage an interest among Faculty to participate in DE initiatives. It should also develop new courses that are more oriented towards online delivery while keeping in mind that there are many students who will need other forms of provision as well.

#### **4.3 *Quality assurance, globalization and competition***

The use of DE methods does not automatically equate with good educational provision. Usually the following six criteria of quality come under study: Curriculum Design and Planning; Teaching/Learning Transaction; Student Support and Achievement; Research and Development; Infrastructure and Learning Resources; Organization and Management. However there is an acute shortage of local data regarding the above. The quality assurance procedures are meant to focus on improving the learner-centeredness approach to its clientele. In order to become a meaningful alternative to more traditional provision, DE practices will need to be transformed by sound educational principles that

are increasingly contextualised<sup>3</sup>. This requires addressing a range of issues including creating quality learning resources using technologies suitable for the target audience and the content of the learning programme, introducing mechanisms supporting distance learners, establishing efficient administrative processes based on appropriate organizational structures and ensuring that quality assurance procedures operate. Sometimes for the success of distance learning initiatives, it is necessary to rope in community support.

At present, DE provision is uncoordinated with various providers making ad hoc plans which are likely to result in duplication and there is a lack of mechanism to ensure quality of ODL provision. This problem is compounded by a lack of operational framework which then makes for a disorganized provision that does not take into consideration the requirements for personal development of individual learners or national development of the country.

Another problem that the education system faces is that of the quality of educational provision with the mushrooming of DE providers, especially in the private sector. There seems to be an increasing influence of the market forces on the DE provision. The resulting effect on organizations is the ambivalence between serving the customer and staying in business.

As at present, issues of quality concerning both course materials and their delivery have rested with overseas providers. While aligning themselves with these, locally produced courses aiming at higher international standards will be enhanced by institutional research on the effectiveness of teaching and learning through DE. In this connection, the *Framework for Quality Assurance in the Tertiary Education Sector* proposed by the TEC is a start towards providing guidelines on the appropriate mechanisms and procedures to be put in place in all institutions operating in ODL in order to ensure the quality of both programmes and processes. A DE-specific document should be prepared soon. The *Code of Practice* and the *Guidelines for Prospective Students of Distance Education Programmes offered by Local and Overseas Institutions* ensures that Mauritian students are provided with the same academic and administrative

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<sup>3</sup> Enseignement a distance et apprentissage libre en Afrique subsaharienne- état des lieux dans les pays francophones, ADEA-GTEDAL, 2003

support services as available in the providing institution's home country. This is especially meant for private providers operating under collaborative arrangements.

For effective and efficient delivery, it is advisable that organizations develop quality assurance practices. The Mauritian tertiary education sector is encouraging the development of a quality culture in its various institutions. Quality assurance plans enable such institutions to check the health of measurable factors. It must be noted with some satisfaction that the Public Funded Institutions are currently engaged in developing their quality assurance plans.

Most private providers of DE are anxious of the competition represented by Public Funded Institutions. The current trend towards consortia agreements with one another is an added source of anxiety for the private providers. The need to support the private providers who deal with foreign DE organizations is strongly felt. As a result of this competitive environment, many such organizations offer courses that appear trendy and possibly duplicate or triplicate provision for a very small existing pool of potential learners. This causes the emphasis to shift from transformative learning and personal development to a more commodified and profitable view of education.

Hence provision is often in conflict with the goals of national development but profitable for the enterprises. An unaware mass of learners caught in a diploma disease where they find themselves in a mad scramble for any type of qualification sign up for inappropriate courses that are delivered with not much concern for the learner's personal development or with the quality of the course design. It is easy to lose ground to mercantile providers because despite their lack of learner-centeredness they are offering courses that come with an attractive (but possibly deceptive) employability package.

## **5.0 The policy situation**

### ***5.1 Policy and the Tertiary Education Commission***

The planning of distance learning usually involves policy issues at international, regional, national and institutional level. The international issues arise in part because the forces of globalization are affecting the content and practices of education, in part because new policy issues arise when education is no longer confined within national barriers. It is highly important to consider these when making judgments about the desirability, feasibility and acceptability of internationalized ideas within individual

countries. Despite the fact that DE initiatives are growing in Mauritius, there is an absence of a completely dedicated framework for the development of DE.

So far, the attention of policy makers was drawn to the need to review the existing operational mechanisms of the Tertiary Education Sector without setting up a new dedicated institution. As earlier discussed proposals towards developing ODL activities in Mauritius rested on cooperation, integration and coordination. Inter-institutional collaboration among the Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs) so as to optimise limited resources was emphasised by J. Radcliffe (1988). The integration of the MCA also seen as the “focal” point of the inter-institutional model with the UoM (UoM) was suggested in Michael Young’s Report (1989). The “consortia” approach (TEC, 1994) focused on coordinated cooperation among the TEIs on the basis of identified projects and potential institutional inputs. This model was founded on optimum utilisation of content inputs provided by the UoM, Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) and Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) in areas of their competence and of “process expertise” in course design, media production and programme delivery provided by the MCA. However, for lack of consensus among the educational partners on the role of the “focal” point, the model based on cooperation, integration and the sharing of functions could not become fully operational.

It is clear that an appropriate and sound framework backed by dynamic policy is vital for cost-effective and cost-efficient ODL operations. Market principles are also the guiding principles in policy-making. The deregulations in financial markets, trade barriers and implementations of multinational companies everywhere in the world are causing a proportional deregulation regarding the educational provision worldwide. If compounded by a lack of distance education-related policy, this can create enormous problems in terms of recognition of qualifications or universities and credit transfer. A policy-less situation can indeed cause the mushrooming of DE providers without a corresponding quality assurance mechanism. This can render the potential learners vulnerable to guile and the diploma disease. We need to examine the range of provision against a backdrop of national needs to ascertain the direction in which we have to move

to evolve contextualized policies in sub-Saharan Africa. The problem needs to be solved at the level of the country, the region as well as internationally.

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), Mauritius operates a Division of Distance Education and Open Learning (DEOL) and which is currently engaging in fieldwork with a view to data generation for policy development. Under the overarching mission of the TEC, the DEOL Division seeks to improve access to quality higher education through Open and Distance Learning. It also aims at providing quality services and informed advice to local, regional and international educational partners. It contributes to the TEC programme which is as follows:

“Foster the development of tertiary education, improve access, promote research and ensure relevance, quality, accountability and optimum use of resources in the TEIs.” (TEC, 2006)

In line with the above the DEOL Division is involved in field work aimed at developing dynamic policies grounded in local needs to implement effective DEOL strategies at tertiary level and oversee provision at other levels and; in assisting Mauritius and regional countries to expand their provision of quality DE through relevant media to increase access, promote equity and enhance social justice. In fact following the proposal in the Budget Speech for year 2004-2005 for the setting up of an Open Learning Institute for Mauritius, the TEC Board organised a Task Force to advise on the setting up of the Open Learning Institute/Open University of Mauritius as well as to prepare a draft Bill and Developmental Plan. The DEOL Division of the TEC provided the technical inputs to that Task Force.

During its discussions, the Task Force came to a consensus regarding the setting up of an Open University as opposed to an Open Learning Institute. It was decided that the organization will be known as the Open University of Mauritius. Regarding program planning, a strategy for collaborative arrangements with organizations offering programs responding to the missions of the schools within the University has been etched. Organizations interested in franchise agreements are meant to be contacted with a view to arrive at Memorandums of Understanding. It is expected that the OUM will become operational in the coming future once the present government reorganizes its priorities.

## 6.0 The future of DE in Mauritius

Given its limited teachable mass, the developments in ODL in the local scenario indicate that this mode of learning and teaching is taking on a significant share of the educational market. Available figures indicate a share of about 28.1%. This is about one third of total provision. However, individual undertakings, for example through online learning are not captured by existing data and it must also be pointed out that this figure relates to a merged category – Private Providers/Distance Education. Efforts are now being channeled towards making a distinction in the above category so that DE-exclusive data emerge.

Table 1 presents available ODL data in Mauritius. This data is culled from the annual survey carried out by the Tertiary Education Commission on Participation in Tertiary Education and covers the years 1999-2005.

**Table 1**

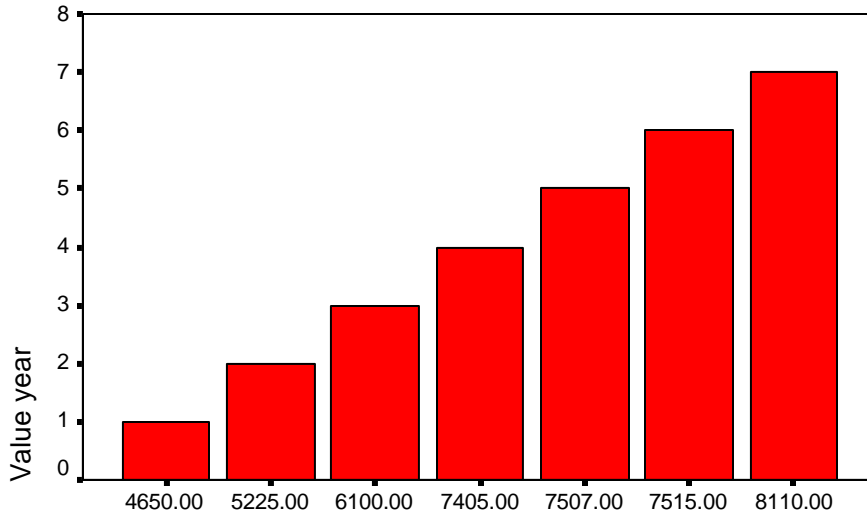
*Total Annual Enrolment Rates in ODL programs for 1999- 2005*

Year	Students	Percentage total enrollees in Tertiary Education
1999	4,650	30.4%
2000	5,225	30%
2001	6,100	29.8%
2002	7,405	32.5%
2003	7,507	29.2%
2004	7,515	29.3%
2005	8,110	28.1%

The above is represented by Bar Chart 1:

### Distance education trends over years

Years from 1999-2005



Bar Chart 1

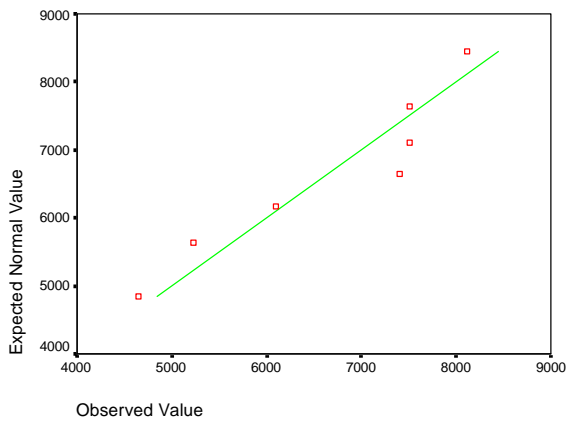
Students

The Bar Chart clearly demonstrates an increasing trend for corresponding years. The above data was entered in SPSS to obtain future probabilities. The sample distribution is normal as evidenced by the following normal probability plot while the one sample statistics indicate the mean number of distance learners being at 6644.5 (over 7 years) with a standard deviation of 1323.9.

#### One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Students	7	6644.5714	1323.9598	500.4098

#### Normal Q-Q Plot of Students





A one sample t-test was then carried out to establish the confidence interval for population means. The results are as follows:

Test Value = 0					
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
				Lower	Upper
13.278	6	.000	6644.5714	5420.1128	7869.0300

For a 95% confidence interval and with a standard deviation of 1325, we can conclude that the average number of students engaged in ODL endeavors is between the lower limit of 5420 and the upper limit of 7869.

Based on an extrapolation of available data it can be inferred that the level of enrollees through ODL will be towards the upper limit of 6000 –plus learners in the future. However because of existing deregulation and the open market educational operations, only approximations can be given and it must be reiterated that an exclusively distance learner population has not yet been established.

## **7.0 The way forward and conclusion**

From the above picture of current developments in the field, it would seem that finally DE in Mauritius is following the global trend. It is leaving the margins of the field to come very much to the center. A look at worldwide developments also seem to indicate that technology is lending an unprecedented edge to DE. The statistical pattern as above discussed also support the view that distance education in Mauritius is on the rising trend. In Mauritius, the following would enable the shift to the fourth generation of DE, that is digital delivery:

- The Development Bank of Mauritius provides tax-deductible loans to purchase computers
- The Mauritius Telecom has introduced ADSL packages at low cost
- Computer courses are being dispensed free of cost to a large section of the population, contributing to the e-learning governmental ambition

- The government supports this endeavor

A few years hence, it is expected that this new generation of DE will become a powerful engine of change in the higher education scene in Mauritius. The need is now felt to evolve a relevant and contextualised policy framework that will articulate felt and expressed educational needs of the nation.

In Mauritius we are closely concerned with the sub-Saharan African context since Mauritius wishes to act as a regional Knowledge Hub to facilitate access to and completion of educational initiatives in the region. Research in this region indicated that there is a wide geographical divide with regard to the impact that ODL provision has had in sub-Saharan Africa. ODL has not had a major role to play in Francophone Africa to date but has played a more significant role in Anglophone countries, especially in the southernmost part of the sub-Continent. In the south of the Continent there is a long-standing active regional association, the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa and several active national associations and a number of well-established ODL providers including the University of South Africa, Technikon Southern Africa, the Open University of Zimbabwe, the Namibian College of Open Learning and the Botswana College of Open and Distance Learning among others. Within South Africa at any one time some 50 providers of ODL are actively involved in the National Association of Distance Education Organizations of South Africa.

It is more than ever urgent to seek areas of collaboration, sharing and capacity building if we are to meet the Millenium Development Goals (MDG). While DE in Mauritius is more concerned with higher education, we should not forget that there are many who do not even complete primary education and thus cannot even dream of tertiary education. We must remember that education is development. It creates choices and opportunities for people, reduces the twin burdens of poverty and diseases, and gives a stronger voice in society, fosters personal and national development. For nations, it creates a dynamic workforce and well-informed citizens able to compete and cooperate globally – opening doors to economic and social prosperity.

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