Opening a New Road to Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

To improve the quality of basic education in the Philippines, the government intends to implement the Enhanced K+12 Basic Education Program beginning this school year 2011-2012. From a 10-year education program, the basic education system in the country is now a 12-year cycle that will include kindergarten, six years of elementary education, four years of junior high school, and two years of senior high school.

However, critics of the new K-12 program say that the additional two years of senior high school will exacerbate current shortage of teachers, classrooms, desks, textbooks, and other inputs to education. Others contend that adding two more years to high school will simply lead to more dropouts among those who can ill afford to be in school and those who need to earn an income as soon as possible in order to help their families.

This paper proposes that a distance education (DE) program offering junior and senior high school will provide every Filipino an opportunity to gain the education he/she needs and deserves under the K+12 curriculum. It recommends a national DE high school program to be implemented in a decentralized manner by a network of participating schools. The paper describes the program's curriculum as one that incorporates vocational and entrepreneurship courses which should be made accessible to students considering their available resources. The paper also emphasizes the importance of student support for a satisfying educational experience and identifies the type of support services to be provided to learners. The paper ends with some thoughts on how to convince skeptics that quality basic education can also be provided through distance education as a new road to lifelong learning.

Sub-theme #3 - *Problems, Barriers, Reforms and Solutions. This sub-theme focuses on issues and concerns in expanding the frontiers of OdeL, as well as initiatives to address these problems at the institutional, national, regional, and global contexts.*

Keywords: *K+12, Distance Education, Open Schooling*

Introduction

The Philippines has started implementing the enhanced K+12 Basic Education Program this school year 2011-2012. This is consistent with Article XIV, section 2 (1) of the 1987 Philippine Constitution which states that *"The state shall establish, maintain, and support a complete, adequate, and integrated system of education relevant to the needs of the people and society."* K+12 means Kindergarten and 12 years of elementary and secondary education. Currently, the country is following a 10-year education program: 6 years of elementary education and 4 of secondary education. The enhanced K+12 educational model of the Philippines will involve Kindergarten, six years of elementary education, four years of junior high school (Grades 7 to 10) and two years of senior high school (Grades 11 and 12).

The additional two years in senior high school intend to give time to students to consolidate their acquired academic skills and competencies. The curriculum will allow specializations in science and technology, music and arts, agriculture and fisheries, sports, business and entrepreneurship, etc. The enhanced K+12 curriculum will be provided by the government free to public schools.

Under the current educational system, the country is experiencing serious shortages of inputs — teachers, classrooms, desks, water and sanitation, quality textbooks, and others. The enhanced K+12 curriculum will aggravate the shortages of inputs mentioned although the Department of Education (DepEd) has already included a provision for substantial physical requirement for 2011 budget.

More worrisome however, is that with K+12, more students may not go on to senior high school and earn a high school-diploma. The Philippine Education Research Journal (PERJ) recognizes that the K+12 plan places more burden to the poor. Longer curriculum postpones the time one would be ready for work, and demands more expenses. As estimated by a youth partylist group, a student needs an average of P20,000 per school year to cover transportation costs, food, school supplies, and other operational expenses. Parents are left to choose between schooling with good earning potential in the future versus present food on the table, some clothing on the back, meeting basic health and other human needs, as they try to cope with survival problems. Parents cannot simply afford the cost of adding two years in basic education according to The League of Filipino Students (LFS). Thus, more youth would be led to drop out. A recent UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) monitoring report (as mentioned by Abrioux, 2009) confirms that the transition from junior to upper secondary continues to represent a significant dropout point in many educational systems.

I propose that a distance education program offering junior and senior high school will provide every Filipino an opportunity to gain the education he/she rightfully deserves. It will prepare them for higher education or for gainful employment. Our proposal for a distance secondary education in the country is in line with a provision in 1987 Philippine Constitution which declares that the state shall take appropriate steps to make quality education accessible to all. Furthermore, it declares that the state shall encourage non-formal, informal and indigenous learning systems, as well as self-learning, independent, and out-of-school study programs particularly those that respond to the community needs.

This paper will look at various management and organizational issues relevant to our proposed secondary distance education program. Our discussion will draw heavily from the experiences of a number of institutions offering secondary education through open and distance learning (ODL) around the world. We will also mention here some of the notable practices of virtual universities worldwide.

The Proposed DE Institution

The first issue at hand is the kind of institution we will form. We have two options: establishing a national institution offering independent and self-learning for secondary education or creating a distance education bureau within the Department of Education (DepEd).

The difference between establishing a national institution and creating a separate bureau is the level of decision-making. Let us look at the cases of Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) and Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL). BOCODOL was created by the parliament itself to take charge of open schooling in the country since 2000. NAMCOL was also created by the Namibian Parliament in 1997 to offer an open secondary education program. Both institutions are separate from the Ministry of Education and are granted autonomy. BOCODOL is governed by a Board of Governors and its operation is run by the College Executive Management. The Board of Governors is composed of key stakeholders from the private and public sectors. Members of the board are appointed by the Minister of Education. This organizational structure proves to be working successfully with BOCODOL. NAMCOL operates under a very similar organizational structure with BOCODOL. Its highest decision making body is also the Board of Governors appointed by the Minister of Education.

Ferreira (2009) emphasized that open schools that have remained part of a civil/public service do not do very well. So, for our proposed distance education institution, the organizational structure mentioned above is highly recommended. The Board and not the Secretary of Education will decide on matters of policy, programs and finances of the institutions. Being free from bureaucratic structures means that the institution's management can make decisions quickly. Kenyatta University has learned that a slow bureaucratic system poses a challenge to the effective delivery of programs. Open College (OC) also experiences lack of autonomy as its administrative processes and practices are defined more by the culture and requirements of its mother organization and not what the college and its students need.

The Organizational Model

The institution's organizational model is the next issue that we will address. Will it operate with centralized or decentralized functions? BOCODOL reports the success of its divisional organizational model and decentralized operations through its five regional centers. It is uniquely characterized by its organizational culture of transparency and consultation.

Decentralized operation is also one of NAMCOL's greatest strengths. It has divided its operations in four regions, each headed by a regional manager. Each region is subdivided into four areas under the area coordinators. Each area coordinator is responsible for a number of tutorial centers. The head of the center supervises the tutors. There are over 100 tutorial centers around Namibia. In each center, a Center Management Committee which functions like a School Board in a conventional system is organized. Its key functions include maintaining discipline, recruiting tutors, administering budgets, and promoting activities in the center of instruction.

In our proposed distance education institution, decentralized operations shall be observed. It shall operate in all regions of the country with tutorial centers in almost all cities and municipalities.

The Sustainability Plan

Although it is proposed as an autonomous entity in terms of governance, the proposed national distance high school institution should receive funding for its operation. At the same time, given the almost perennial problem of shortage in government funds, the institution

needs to have a plan for its long-term sustainability. The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) in India for example, generates funds mainly from collection of admission fees and has become self-sufficient. Open College (OC) in Papua New Guinea adequately meets its operational costs through tuition fees while the Vancouver Learning Network (VLN) obtains minimal revenue from tuition fees. Because our proposed institution will cater primarily to youths and adults who cannot afford to finance their high school education, collecting fees from them will be inappropriate. However, tuition can still be one of our institution's revenue sources. How? We will accept "paying" students. They are those who could afford to shoulder the cost of their schooling. Other sources of revenue may include grants for various projects, interest on savings, and sale of its copyrighted self-instructional materials.

Cost-cutting is also an aspect of sustainability to be explored. BOCODOL implements the policy on shared use of resources with host schools that serve as tutorial centers. It uses host schools' classroom facilities, libraries and teaching materials at no cost. It has been reported that the implementation of policy on shared use of resources has led to cost-cutting, efficiency and sustainability of college operations. Aside from classroom facilities, BOCODOL also gains access to host schools' human resources by using its teachers as part-time tutors and markers and are only paid allowances. This has been proven to be less expensive than engaging full-time tutors. NAMCOL also employs the services of part-time tutors. It had more than 1,000 part-time tutors in 2009. It also hires on contractual basis its heads of tutorial centers, course writers, editors and moderators. Outsourcing other services such as security, landscaping, cleaning services and printing is also less expensive.

Our proposed distance education institution should practice the sharing of resources by collaborating with DepEd for local schools to be used as tutorial centers around the country. Schools with library and computer facilities are preferred. The teachers in these local schools shall be recruited as part-time tutors for the face-to-face tutorials for the open high school students. A memorandum of understanding to this effect should be signed by the institution and the local schools.

The Delivery Mode

The mode of delivery must be given emphasis in planning for distance education. With the advent of technology, one could immediately jump to providing courses through the internet. In fact, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) in Malaysia was advised through its feasibility studies to use the internet infrastructure for student connectivity and interaction. Looking at Taylor's (1995) models of distance education, institution may choose from five possible models— correspondence, multimedia, telelearning, flexible learning and the intelligent flexible learning. With the advent of modern technologies however, Bates noted that in 2002-2003 there were still more distance students in print and broadcast (around four to five million). The case of British Open University (UKOU) provides us with at least three reasons why traditional media still dominate. First, there has been a concern that many students will not have convenient and ready access to a computer and the internet. Second, even if most homes (in Britain) eventually get Internet and computer access, UKOU cannot change from an institution of mass education to a web-based education without reinventing itself. Third, it is costly to replace print-based education with online learning. Notably, going online is more expensive. For example, UNITAR's capital expenditure was about US$8 million in 1998 and US$10 million in 1999. The National Institute of Information

Technology (NIIT) devotes fifty-two percent of its total annual expenditure to its technology infrastructure.

Although the overall trend now is more online courses and fewer print-based courses in distance education, our proposed national distance education institution in the country should be print-based and not online. Gauthier (2009) warned us that it is an error to allow available technology to define educational programs. Technology must be considered but must not drive the educational decision making. It is important to develop a program based on best educational practices to provide the highest quality of learning. The focus must be the learners and not the technology. As we have identified, our major clients for our proposed DE institution are youths and adults who cannot afford to pay for their high school education. It is expected that they do not have access to a computer and the internet. Aside from being accessible, printed text remains relatively inexpensive per pupil (Ferreira, 2009). Research has also shown that the print, audio and pre-recorded instructional television media tend to be cheaper (Rumble, 2009).

Our proposed delivery system (patterned after OC) should include a package of self-directed, print-based learning materials that are complemented by multimedia (CD-ROM, interactive computer-based, video content and audio) to enhance student's learning. These course materials are to be distributed to students during the registration period at the tutorial centers. Multimedia materials can be used during tutorial sessions using the facilities of host schools.

As recommended by Ferreira, there should be a regular face-to-face contact with learners. These tutorial sessions should be conducted in host schools by part-time tutors. The role of the tutors includes marking assignments and providing detailed feedback. A facilitative approach (NAMCOL) should be used during face-to-face contact sessions to foster independent learning among learners.

The DE Curriculum

The purpose of our institution is to prepare students for higher education and for gainful employment. Our curriculum therefore, should be aligned to that purpose. Murangi (2009) suggests that open schools (should) focus on the curriculum that prepares learners to secure sustainable livelihoods. According to the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) monitoring report (as mentioned by Ferreira), young adults and out-of-school youths are very interested in skills acquisition and that technical and vocational subjects are highly favored by them. BOCODOL has added vocational and entrepreneurship courses to its curriculum for students interested in running small scale business. The AOC offers the same curriculum as the conventional schools do, including vocational subjects, but it has the advantage of using OS models to offer more vocational schooling.

We then propose that our high school curriculum should be intertwined with a vocational and entrepreneurship courses.

The Support Services

To be successful, special attention must be given to how the institution supports its learners. However, Bates emphasized that the cost of learner support service is more than the cost of

high quality materials. Most of the companies who lost money in e-learning underestimated the cost of learner support in their business plans. On the other hand, if the student support is high, then the returns for the institution are equally high as dropout rates are low. Bates cites the example of the University of Phoenix Online which has maintained a successful online presence for 10 years catering to a niche market and providing consistent and high quality support although its content is sneered at by prestigious universities.

To support its learners, BOCODOL has a network of 92 learning centers spread across the country covering even the most remote learners. Learning centers are places where both learner-learner and learner-tutor interactions take place to enhance distance learning. These centers provide services ranging from pre-enrolment counseling, enrolment, dispatching of study materials, induction, guidance counseling, face-to-face tutorials, motivational seminars, weekend and vacation classes, to examination skills workshop. NAMCOL also adopted a learner-centered approach to education through blended learning. Weekly tutorials are provided to students. Other academic support services include feedback on tutor-marked assignments and provision of multimedia content. Support through the use of short messaging (SMS) has also been found to be effective as a tool to communicate reminders and urgent information to learners and tutors.

NetVarsity supports its close to 500,000 learners worldwide through its educational portal with different functional components such as online shopping and e-commerce engine, content delivery and load-balancing system, asynchronous and synchronous technical web services. It also has invested resources in best software for its servers. Aside from course-assigned teachers, VLN provides its students with access to qualified teacher-counsellors who can provide student counseling.

The University of Maryland University College adopted an interactive model in its online course delivery. This model features two-way communication (from instructor to students and back again, as well as among students), less use of multimedia and more print-based conferring, and greater faculty involvement in the learning process. Despite the fact that the model would be ultimately expensive for the university to implement and maintain, this model believes to provide a much more satisfying educational experience to students. Haughey and Stewart (2009) suggested that student services should focus on enhancing the students' own learning skills.

We propose that the following services should be provided to our students: library support, program advising, writing and mathematics assistance, and information literacy skills building. The students can use the library facilities of the host schools. The institution should pay for the honorarium of the librarian for the days it was utilized by the students. The host-school's computer facilities can also be used in developing the students' information literacy skills. The institution should pay part of the school's electric bill. Honorariums should be paid to teachers who rendered advising and assisted the students in writing and in math. Schocroft (2009) also recommends organizing student events to allow face-to-face celebrating and socializing.

Convincing the Skeptics

We shall now look at another equally important issue in distance education: convincing the skeptics and unbelievers that distance education works. Skeptics and unbelievers include

students, parents, academics, and even governments. Distance education planners and managers must be able to address their concerns. VLN provides parents with correct and current information about distributed learning through parents' council meetings. UNITAR recognizes its need for an aggressive marketing to explain the virtual university concept and convince students of its validity. Institutional marketing and promotion activities must be done to ensure that all students who would benefit from ODL have the knowledge of its existence and advantages. Some virtual universities acquire accreditation and some even acquired ISO certification such as what USQOnline did. However, challenges are still felt like the failure of the US Congress to officially recognize online delivery of courses as equivalent to face-to face classroom delivery, for financial aid purposes. In Argentina, Ministry authorities are still reluctant to grant full university studies via the internet. The accrediting body has not yet established the guidelines and criteria for off-campus online programs.

Meanwhile in our country, only policies and guidelines for distance education for higher education exist. Expecting the growth of institutions that will provide secondary education through DE mode, it is suggested that structures for registration, regulation and quality assurance of distance education schools must be established. However, we see some light to this proposal in the passage of a bill in the Philippine's House of Representatives improving access to education through open learning and distance education. Although the bill is intended for post secondary and tertiary levels, it will institutionalize (when passed into a law) distance education in the country.

Conclusion

We have seen from the experience of other countries that secondary-level distance education works. Considering the various management and organizational issues that need to be addressed, it is therefore recommended that a separate institution must be created for our country's secondary-level distance education. The said institution shall operate with grants from the government but shall be governed autonomously by a Board. It shall provide the necessary junior and senior high school education to all Filipinos regardless of their age, gender, and location. The curriculum shall be the same with conventional schools but enhanced with technical and vocational courses. The courses shall be print-based and complemented with face-to-face instruction. Support services shall be provided to make learning exciting and meaningful.

With our proposed institution, we are opening a new road for lifelong learning. That road is distance education.

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