Opening doors for the ‘less privileged’ – The MCA experience

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ABSTRACT
This paper highlights MCA’s contribution to making tertiary education accessible to target groups ‘marginalised’ by conventional systems of teaching/learning. Since its creation in 1971 democratising access to education through mass media has been the raison d’être of the Mauritius College of the Air.

Along the years, ODL, the golden goose of the developing world (Perraton, 2000)\(^1\) and of our instructional system has laid flexible methodologies for higher learning, hatching benefits for adults seeking to learn differently at their convenience. The continuing appeal of our ODL methodology lies in its self-learning materials which enable self-paced learning anywhere anytime. A recent survey indicates that our instructional system draws (a) more female enrollees than male (b) a significant number of mature working adults, and (c) learners mostly from less privileged income groups. The survey also shows that women consider learning permissible and compatible with motherhood as well as job constraints within our flexible learning environment. Mature working adult respondents aged 35 and above view our programmes as a second chance, offering the convenience of andragogy and suitable pace. Many of the respondents find the cost of our programmes affordable.

Globalisation has enabled home-based access to prestigious overseas universities and the import of reasonably-priced courses with self-learning materials from internationally acclaimed institutions. These partnerships have widened our panoply of undergraduate, postgraduate and professional programmes, catering to the needs of individuals employed in education, business and commerce, medical and transport domains. The current paradigm explores innovative ways of collaboration epitomised by interactive tele-learning programmes broadcast in real-time by overseas partner institutions.

MCA is now venturing into another dimension of opening the doors of higher learning and bringing it closer to the ‘less privileged’.
Keywords: opening doors, less privileged, marginalised, ODL, self-learning materials, tele-learning.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Triggered by an initial curiosity about the differential profile of Mauritius College of the Air ‘s (MCA) Open and Distance Learning (ODL) learners, this paper explores MCA’s contribution to making higher education accessible to adults in need of an alternative mode of learning. It is based on two key research questions (1) who is the typical MCA learner? (2) what makes the ODL mode germane to this type of learner? 102 students across 6 disciplines were surveyed and a telephone interview was carried out for further probing with one of these respondents. Significant patterns in learner demographics have emerged. Findings provide insight into the power of ODL to fight knowledge imperialism, create opportunity and bring about social justice.

1.1 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

ODL refers to practices that enable access to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints. Learning is delivered through print, audiovisual and ICT-mediated self-learning reference materials to those separated by time and space from those who are teaching. MCA programmes are delivered mostly through print materials supported by weekly/fortnightly tutoring at learner-friendly times. The new generation of programmes, though, are offered through state of the art teleconferencing.
The ‘golden goose of the developing world’ (Perraton, 2000)[1], ODL has been a practical strategy to address the challenge of widening access at a lesser cost through economies of scale. It is a sustainable, flexible, convenient and cost-effective model capable of reaching working adults at their doorstep.

The term 'less privileged' refers to individuals who have few or no opportunities to access higher education due to (a) their multiple socio-economic commitments (b) mature age, (c) limited financial means, and (d) inadequate academic qualifications. Such non-traditional learners are unable to access conventional institutions and are threatened by ‘knowledge imperialism’ in an increasingly knowledge-driven world (ICDE, 2009).[2] They are deprived of their right to higher education as stated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This paper argues that the MCA opens the doors to tertiary education for such ‘marginalised’ individuals.

1.2 MAURITIUS COLLEGE OF THE AIR

MCA, a para-statal non-profit institution, has a four-decade long history of democratising education. Set up with help from the International Extension College in 1971 to promote education in the newly independent Mauritius through mass media and ‘correspondence courses’ (Dhurbarrylall, 1991)[3], it has striven ever since to widen access. Back in 1972, in his inaugural speech, the first Prime Minister of the country spoke of the MCA’s role to ‘equalise educational facilities’ (Dodds, 1975)[4]. MCA attained the status of tertiary institution in 1998. Although distance learning activities were ongoing, the division of distance Education was set up in 1994 following assistance by the Open University, UK.

2 GLOBALISATION

Globalisation has increased the internalisation of higher learning and empowered the MCA to widen access at a lesser cost. From delivery of a limited range of local courses, the MCA has gradually participated in various forms of cross-border collaborations to (a) counter heavy cost of course development, (b) reduce course fees, (c) train staff, and (d) increase the diversity of professional, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes to cater to market needs. These transnational initiatives comprise

- Course development (with UNISA)
- Consultancy (Open University, UK)
- Staff training for capacity building (e.g. Tele Universite de Quebec, University of London)
- Licensing of course materials (NEC, IGNOU)
- Funding of projects (IEC, UNICEF, World Bank)
- Import of programmes.

Funding and staff training, however, are dwindling, virtually non-existent at present. Conversely, the import of programmes has grown in breadth and scope. The following table shows the growth in the number and range of partnerships over a decade.

*International Partnerships and programmes over the past decades*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2000</th>
<th>Year 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>International Partners</strong></td>
<td><strong>Programmes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Transport (UK)</td>
<td>Diploma Advanced Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chartered Institute of Marketing (UK)</td>
<td>CIM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGNOU</td>
<td>DIM BCA BTS BCom MBA</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2.1 PAN-AFRICAN E-NETWORK
The Pan-African e-network is a fine illustration of international networking in higher education to reduce the “tertiary divide”. Initiated by former Indian president Abdul Kalam in 2009, it has provided the technological capacity to wire MCA and more than 12 other educational institutions across Africa for synchronous interactions such as teleconferenced lectures from the University of Madras, IGNOU and Amity. The availability of archived lectures on the provider websites makes this mode of delivery flexible and convenient for working adults.

3 RESEARCH
3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Who is the typical MCA learner? Why does ODL appeal to this learner? Random perceptions have hitherto informed our views given the dearth of relevant statistical information on the MCA student population. This survey attempts to explore patterns in learner profiles.

3.2 RESEARCH METHOD
Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect data. Collection instruments consisted of a questionnaire survey and a telephone interview.

Undertaken in January 2011, the survey aimed at gathering demographic and socio-economic details such as age, gender, marital status, income, and reasons for opting for ODL among others. Learners following 6 programmes were distributed questionnaires when they attended their Saturday tutorials at our learning centre in Belle Rose SSS. All present filled in the questionnaire. The following programmes ranging from Diploma to Master’s level were selected on the basis of representativeness in terms of academic level and discipline:

- Diploma in Library and Information Science
- BA English
- BSc Management
- Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Management
Data gathered during the survey inspired us to probe deeper into certain trails. A telephone interview was carried out with one female respondent from the 102 previously surveyed. She was selected on account of (a) gender (b) mature age (c) lack of conventional formal qualifications (d) limited financial means. A structured approach was taken with certain key prompts. These covered (a) access problems (b) learning motivations and (c) appropriateness of ODL. She will be referred to as Aastha for confidentiality reasons.

3.3 FINDINGS
Findings point at 5 interesting elements in the profile of those surveyed:

- 73.5% are female
- 51% are aged above 35
- 96% are working
- 67.6% earn less than Rs 20,000 monthly
- 10% do not have A-levels.

Our findings indicate that ODL has played a key role in empowering women, mature learners, the economically-disadvantaged and the ‘qualifications-challenged’ through access to higher education. Following analysis of each of these profile elements, the case of Aastha, who embodies all these, will be discussed.

3.3.1 Empowering Women
Women learners considerably outnumbered their male counterparts – 73.5% of the population surveyed. The chart below shows the number of male and female learners tally out of 102.
Interestingly, 86.8% of them said they opted for ODL on account of its flexibility. 68% of these women are married and out of these 88% have children. Moreover, in the open-ended section of the questionnaire some stated how the ODL mode provided space for learning whilst juggling multiple household, childcare and professional commitments. It provides ‘flexible time management possibilities while preventing classroom attendance’. This is in line with worldwide studies on the potential of ODL to widen access to higher learning for women. Qureshi (2002, cited in Kwapong 2007)\(^5\) postulates that this mode of learning ‘attracts more married women than on campus forms’ and rightly argues that ODL helps women circumvent ‘constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities.’

A comparison of the women’s enrolment rate at undergraduate level with that at postgraduate level reveals that thrice more women have enrolled on undergraduate (79%) than postgraduate programmes (21%) as illustrated in the following chart:

![Women in Undergraduate and Postgraduate programmes](chart.png)

The greater participation of women in undergraduate studies, it would seem, is also a global trend. Pryzmuś (2004, cited in Kwapong 2007)\(^5\) asserts that women are ‘more likely than men to interrupt their studies for parenthood.’ Many women are so constrained by their diverse parental, household, and work obligations that ODL is their ‘first chance’ to university education (Reuss, 1994, cited in Kwapong 2007)\(^5\). It is speculated that after
undergraduate studies they take another break to attend to their multiple duties. There is a need for further research in this area.

3.3.2 Empowering Mature Learners
More than half (51%) of those surveyed are aged over 35, 10% are beyond 50. Moreover, 96% of those surveyed are working. ODL literature abounds on the appropriateness of this mode for adult learners (Knowles 1990 cited in Kwapong, 2007) \(^{[5]}\). Indeed 68.6% said they opted for ODL due to its flexibility. Our self-learning materials enable busy adults to study at their convenience and their pace. Moreover, our tutorial timings viz. Saturdays and/or weekdays after normal working hours make learning ‘permissible’ in the time-deprived’ hectic life of mature adults. ODL provides such individuals an environment conducive for learning as well as andragogical strategies apt for the learning style of adults (Knowles 1990, cited in Thomas and Soares, 2009) \(^{[6]}\).

46% stated ‘other commitments’ as reasons for late entry to higher education. It is surmised that financial constraints could have been a deterrent. There seems to be a ‘modest correlation between greater or mature age and low socio-economic status’ (Thomas and Soares, 2009) \(^{[6]}\). The humble economic background of our learners will be discussed in the ensuing section.

3.3.3 Empowering the Economically-disadvantaged
Cost is frequently adduced as a factor that inhibits ‘less well off students’ from having access to higher education leading to ‘disparity of opportunity among social classes’ (Thomas and Soares 2009) \(^{[6]}\). ODL reduces the cost of learning and debunks the ‘exclusivity’ of higher education (ICDE, 2009) \(^{[2]}\). Indeed 49% of those surveyed said they would not have been able to afford another programme. Cost, it would seem is an important push factor as evidenced in another recent MCA survey on those enrolling on Amity programmes. 43% admitted cost affordability as a prime attraction.

Interestingly our survey revealed that 67.6% earn less than Rs 20 000 monthly – an amount close to the current non-taxable income group (Rs 19 700) decreed by the Mauritius Revenue Authority. Moreover, 42% earn less than Rs 15 000. The following table shows the income profile of the learners surveyed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income group of learners surveyed</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Undergraduate/Diploma Progs</th>
<th>Postgraduate Progs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>less than 15 000</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary Range</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 000-20 000</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 000-30 000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 000-40 000</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>above 40 000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It would seem that diploma/undergraduate learners earn less than postgraduate ones. This could be due to their humble jobs. Another interesting fact is that only a minority earn more than Rs 40 000. These economic characteristics suggest that MCA learners have a rather modest financial profile. MCA’s non-profit orientation and ODL mandate are ‘inclusionary’ factors that enable the import of affordable programmes from prestigious overseas partners.

3.3.4 Empowering the Qualifications-challenged

10% admitted to not having A-levels. They were able to access Diploma programmes and BSc Management through alternative qualifications and/or recognition of work experience. These alternative routes such as the MCA-designed Certificate in Librarianship and Information Science and the Diploma in Management aim “to bridge” the A-levels gap. They have created opportunities for individuals debarred entry to higher learning, giving them a chance to improve their socio-economic status. Aastha’s story will exemplify this further.

3.3.5 Aastha

Aastha, our telephone interview respondent, is the voice of the less-privileged learners – now empowered through ODL. Coming from a low-income rural background, Aastha is 44. She left school after her O-levels, got married at the age of 19 and gave birth to three children. She accessed MCA’s Diploma in Management on account of her work experience in the pre-primary sector. On completion of her diploma she was given an increment. She is now in her first year of BSc Management jointly offered by the MCA and the University of Technology, Mauritius.

ODL has enabled her to climb up two rungs of the tertiary ladder and increased her ‘self-esteem’. Her socio-economic status has improved. She is now juggling family and work responsibilities whilst coping with undergraduate studies and looking after her seriously ill husband. Aastha says she would not have been able to afford higher education without the MCA.
4 CONCLUSION
The survey has produced a rich yield of data and paved the way for further research on a number of issues. MCA has opened the doors of higher learning for the less privileged in terms of gender-based socio-economic burden, mature age, modest financial means and lack of formal qualifications. We second Pityana’s (cited in ICDE 2009)[2] comment ‘perhaps what we as ODL practitioners acknowledge and what we quietly celebrate, is that the growth of ODL is testament to the demise of exclusivity in higher education provision’. Still more domains of flexible learning/teaching remain to be explored to create still more opportunities. Decision- makers must lift constitutional, financial, and technological barriers to empower MCA to exploit further ODL possibilities.

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REFERENCES


