

PROPOSAL: (ID 386-410)

Education for all – how can this be achieved in Mauritius with the help of open education?

Mauritius is a small country with a population of 1.2 million and it rates amongst the best developing countries in the African region. The rate of development is comparable to many developed countries and it has been classed in the category of countries with a high human development index. The Human Development Index for Mauritius is 0.804, which gives the country a rank of 65th out of 177 countries with data (source : UNDP report). The adult literacy rate is 84.3 % according to the same report. But there is still a percentage of pupils who drop out of the educational system without having a good notion of reading and writing. Some are even unable to write their names, to sign or to read a small notice.

Education is compulsory till the age of 13 but the rate of enrolment at primary level is 95%. The pass rate for Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examination was only 67.9% in 2006, according to the Central Statistics Office.

Open education is slowly but surely finding a place in the system of education in Mauritius due to the numerous benefits that it, provides specially at the tertiary level. This paper will discuss the ways that open education can be used to remedy the deficiencies in our education system and how we can reach those who have been left out of the system of education.

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INTRODUCTION

The term “Open learning” is usually used in the context of distance education. This term when being used to designate distance education emphasises the “openness” of the teaching learning process (Keegan, 1988). It stresses that access to open learning is easier and that students are allowed to operate with a high degree of autonomy. This approach tries to give more choice and control to the learners. A study undertaken by UNESCO (2002) recognised that open and distance learning is now a force contributing to the social and economic development in any country. In Mauritius, the same trend is being noticed. The student population engaged in tertiary level is close to 30 000 as learners, especially adult learners are recognising the benefits from this type of education.

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Education is compulsory till the age of 13 but the rate of enrolment at primary level is 95%. The pass rate for Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) examination was only 67.9% in 2006, according to the Central Statistics Office. The government is trying to find ways and means to deal with the deficiencies in the actual system due to the high level of level of drop out from the educational system. The government is actually in the process of implementing the EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME which will help to “democratise the economy be broadening the circle of opportunities to each Mauritian citizen, create employment and bring social justice”. One of the main aims of this programme is “enhancing education of the

children in the most vulnerable households in the country". After much deliberation and discussion, the government has decided to turn towards "open education" to help these children mostly because of the flexibility that it provides. It is difficult to impose rigid timetables and examinations to these children due to the difficult conditions in which they are living.

The different local authorities in the island are also feeling concerned and are trying to help those who have been left behind from the educational scene. They have realised that there is a relatively high percentage of adults who are not able to read a letter or even to write their names. As such, it is very difficult for them to earn a livelihood and it was a necessity to provide them with a "basic" education. The Municipality of Port Louis is one of the most active local authorities in Mauritius and it has been the first to launch a program to help the people in its locality. One of the means that the Municipality is using to help these people is through open learning mostly due to the flexibility that this system provides. These learners can have access to education freely and everyone can participate irrespective of age. The courses are not examinable as they are here to help the people. The teachers are also giving the lectures freely.

The Municipality of Port Louis launched the first course in October 2007 and since then these courses are attracting a lot of people in the locality. The aim of the "Université Populaire" created is to "spread culture and education freely to the mass". The principles of this "university" are based on those of traditional universities and lectures are held on a monthly basis. Much scope is given to the learners to participate and to interact with the lecturers so that they can develop a critical mind. The range of courses has increased due to the high demand and now they are trying to help people who want to create a small business or commerce. So there are courses in entrepreneurship and management which are being offered to people interested and they are shown different ways in which they can obtain the help of the government if they want to set up a business; for example how they can get grants or aids from the "Empowerment fund" or from any other source. This program has met with such an unexpected success that other local authorities are following the steps of the Municipality of Port Louis. The Municipality of Curepipe, another active local authority is in the process of setting up the "Université Populaire" to help the needy people in its locality.

Open education has also made lifelong learning a reality for adults who are already in the work market due to the flexibility that it provides. Stakeholders in education have realised that a large majority of adults who are already working wish to continue education, especially in the field that they are working. This will help them in their work or will give them more scope in their career. As such, many institutions are turning towards open education to cater to this category of learners. The University of Mauritius has set up a "Centre for professional development and lifelong learning" in 2005 whose main aims are to:

- Design and deliver Programmes of a non-conventional nature targeted towards the whole community, to face the emerging needs created by the re-engineering of the Mauritian society.
- Encourage the continuing personal growth and intellectual development of adults, empowering them to reflect and generate change for themselves.

Since its setting up, this centre has promoted the development of short courses which are more accessible to students who need flexibility and who seek immediate pertinence and relevance in the programme in which they are involved. As such, it is offering second chance opportunities to mature learners and meeting the needs for retraining and upgrading skills of professionals. Short-targeted executive training programmes are also being tailor-made to the clients' needs. The centre is also encouraging the delivery of short programmes during the vacation periods. Up to now, the centre has run more than 25 short courses known as Summer/Winter courses, covering different fields (for example: planning tools, environment, diabetes, nutrition, hygiene, entrepreneurship, basic finance...). Based on the Evaluation Questionnaires, it was found that overall, students were very satisfied with the courses and made an appeal for other such courses. There was a request to offer courses that will complement and complete what was started through the winter courses. Working students welcomed such initiatives from the University of Mauritius, considering that these courses are of high standard and meet their immediate needs. It was very encouraging to see that the public at large showed such interest in this initiative of the University.

CONCLUSION

Educators in both industrialised and developing countries have used open and distance education to help their problems of resources, access, quality and quantity. (Perraton, 2000). The same phenomenon has been and is being observed in Mauritius. Open education is being used to solve some of the deficiencies in our educational system by giving accessibility to education to the public. It is being used as a tool to reach those children who have dropped out of the system due to the difficulties that they may be facing namely financial, access... It is also being used to give a second chance opportunity to mature learners. It would be beneficial if all who are needy could get access to open education to increase their knowledge or to earn their livelihood. The government should encourage this trend so as to decrease the illiteracy rate and so as to promote "Education for all" in the country.

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