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## **THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION FOR OPEN LEARNING 1995 - 2000**

We began work in 1995, following a proposal made a year earlier by Michael Young, director of the Institute of Community Studies and inventor of the name 'open university'. In a speech for its 25th anniversary he argued that, while open and distance learning had grown dramatically in the last quarter century, research had lagged behind. He called for a research foundation that would serve as a look-out tower for open learning.<sup>1</sup> By the autumn of 1995 he had established an international steering group for the new foundation and persuaded the Leverhulme Trust to fund a one-year investigation of its feasibility. The steering group appointed Hilary Perraton as project director. He was returning from a post as educational planner for distance education at the University of the West Indies, having previously worked on international educational policy for ten years at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The feasibility study looked at the quality and quantity of research in Britain and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Studies were commissioned of the state of research on open and distance learning in three continents and in relation to basic education.<sup>3</sup> The report drew a distinction between research on the context of open and distance learning, of particular interest to policy and decision-makers, and on its application, aimed mainly at practitioners. The widest gaps were in research on context; while research units within a handful of open universities had produced a range of findings on detail to guide practitioners, the feasibility study confirmed that policy makers were still ill-served by existing research. Over the following four years, IRFOL has refined its definition of its own research priorities. While it has done a modest set of studies for practitioners, its main concern has been with major issues of policy. Its work has concentrated on three areas: open and distance learning for basic education, in higher education, and for the education of teachers. Cutting across these areas we have been concerned about the appropriate use of technologies in education. From the outset it was clear that there were advantages in looking at the needs of developing and industrialised countries together; the steering group has consistently put them in that order and the greater part of IRFOL's work has been in the south rather than the north. Along with the execution of research has gone a concern for publication of research results.

IRFOL's programme has also been shaped by funding. As the positive results of the feasibility study were becoming clear, we sought unsuccessfully for a general grant, for an initial three-year programme. Instead, with no base budget, we have obtained grants for a series of individual research projects, which fit within the broad framework identified in the feasibility study. We were helped in getting work moving, within these constraints, by three sets of allies. First is the regional office of the Open University which provided an office and support services for the new foundation. We have remained a grateful tenant of theirs. Second was the Commonwealth of Learning which provided two, annual, pump-priming grants to IRFOL, the only general funding it has received. Third is the steering group which has brought international support, expertise and advice.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION**

We began here. The rise of the world's open universities has made them a significant component of higher education and therefore provoked important questions about their audiences, methods, costs and effects. As the feasibility study was under way, the European Commission was seeking bids for funds for collaborative work on open and distance learning within its Socrates programme. In 1996 we sought two-year funding to investigate the cost-effectiveness of open and distance learning in further and higher education within the European Union. Working in association with Dublin City University, the Open Learning Foundation in Britain, and the Institut de Recherche sur l'Economie de l'Education (IREDU) of the Université de Bourgogne, we carried out eleven case studies of distance learning projects within Europe. Thomas Hülsmann, who came to us with a background in the economics of education and experience of working in English, French and German, did the case studies and produced our findings. Some of these, on the most significant variables influencing costs and on the comparative costs of different technologies were summarised in a report for the Department for Education and Employment commissioned as a spin-off from the Socrates project; Thomas Hülsmann also reported on them in a book chapter on costs.<sup>4</sup> The main outcome of the project was a handbook on costs and costing, subsequently published for us by the University of Oldenburg, the location of one of our case studies.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of our Socrates work the Department for Education and Employment asked us to write them a handbook on the choice of technologies for education. Our work on this was closely linked to an assignment for the Open Learning Foundation. It saw cooperation between institutions as one of the main ways in which open and distance learning could help meet the government's targets for expanding higher education. We therefore investigated national and international experience in cooperation for open and distance learning and drafted recommendations for the Open Learning Foundation.<sup>6</sup>

We found two opportunities to look at higher education outside Europe. First, the Commonwealth of Learning commissioned us to develop and act as managing editors of an annual *World review of distance education and open learning*. The scale of development of open and distance learning in higher education made this a natural topic for the first volume in the series, published in 1999.<sup>7</sup> This volume was concerned with broad issues of policy. In contrast, with funding from the (then) Overseas Development Administration we were able to look at two critical and down-to-earth issues that were causing problems for many open and dual-mode universities in the south: how to train course writers and how to reward them. Charlotte Creed, who joined us from a background of research in language teaching as well as distance education, surveyed international practice and, in its light, was able to draw up practical guidance for managers and educators.<sup>8</sup>

All this work, and the contact with universities that it required, helped identify the next stage of our work in higher education. Some of its themes, about educational expansion, the changing technologies, and the impact of globalisation were explored in a keynote paper for the annual conference of the Australian Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia in 1997.<sup>9</sup> We went on to discuss with several open universities in Asia the possibility of a cooperative research project that would assess their progress and impact while generating proposals for strengthening their own activity. This

was the theme of a paper to the Asian Association of Open Universities conference in Beijing in 1999<sup>10</sup> and led to a proposal for a research project within the Department for International Development's (DFID) Skills for Development programme. Among its aims is to seek lessons from the considerable Asian experience of open-university work that might be applied to the crippling problems of university expansion in Africa.

### **TEACHER EDUCATION**

While open universities have attracted the most public attention to open and distance learning, its use for teachers is on a comparable scale. There have probably been over 100 projects and programmes of teacher education at a distance, in both the south and the north. The importance of the issue, and its links between basic and higher education, put it at the centre of our agenda.

In 1996 we were invited by the Commonwealth of Learning, on behalf of the Asian Development Bank, to investigate the cost effectiveness of distance education for teacher training and report on this at a seminar on teacher education in the high-population Asian countries.<sup>11</sup> A year later the (then) Economic Development Institute of the World Bank invited us to work with them in setting up a colloquium on distance education for teachers within the framework of its Global Knowledge conference *Knowledge for development in the information age* in Toronto. The colloquium was intended to shape future activity, including new research work, by the Bank and others. Our working paper was revised and subsequently published by the Bank.<sup>12</sup>

We have continued to work in teacher education, at various different levels of activity, over the following years. We have, for example, been advising the English charity CfBT on a teacher education project in Vietnam. We looked at its relevance for basic education, as noted below, in preparing for the Dakar forum. During 2000 we began a new phase of work with both DFID and UNESCO. Hilary Perraton was invited by the Department for International Development to join the advisory group for the prime minister's initiative, Imfundo, on using communications technology for teacher education in Africa.

He also advised on the drafting of papers for an Imfundo resource bank.<sup>13</sup> UNESCO has invited us to work with it in carrying out a series of case studies of recent experience in using open and distance learning for teacher education and, in the light of those studies, to draw up guidelines for implementing new programmes of this kind. In a parallel activity the Department for International Development is funding a mapping exercise on distance education for teachers.

These two projects will enable us to make a comprehensive review of recent experience. We anticipate that they will feed into a planned fourth volume in the *World review of distance education and open learning* on teacher education.

## **BASIC EDUCATION**

From its establishment IRFOL has wanted to explore how far open and distance learning can be used for basic education, exploring the paradox that while its methods can in principle widen access to education they have apparently only a modest record of success in meeting the needs of disadvantaged, out-of-school, education. We obtained a grant from CfBT to explore how open and distance learning is being used to offer the equivalent of the lower end of secondary education in some five countries in the south. We worked closely with a group of institutions using print and radio to offer the equivalence of schooling. Dr Palitha Edirisingha joined us to carry out this work, bringing with him relevant experience in extension work in Sri Lanka. He did the bulk of this work between 1998 and 2000, carrying out case studies in association with distance-teaching institutions in India, Thailand, South Africa, Botswana and the Canary Islands. He put a preliminary report of its outcomes to the Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in Brunei in 1999 and drew on their lessons in a chapter for the second volume of the *World Review*.<sup>14</sup> Arrangements are now being made for the full report to be published.

The research identified a set of conditions for success in out-of-school projects. It also led to requests to IRFOL that it should work with our partner institutions on a series of action-research projects that would strengthen their own practice, raise their research capacity, and feed into an international comparative review of methods, outcomes and costs. We therefore designed a follow-up research programme which DFID has recently agreed to fund over the next two years.

The international community called the World Forum on Education for All in Dakar in April 2000 to review progress since the Jomtien conference of 1990. An important question for the forum concerned the significance of communications technologies and distance education in achieving the renewed targets of quality education for all by 2015. On behalf of the international agencies, and with funding from DFID, UNESCO invited us to draft a thematic study for the conference and to present its findings in a round table. This required us to carry out a worldwide review of experience and to compare current roles of the technologies with those reported a decade earlier.<sup>15</sup> In order to guide the preparation of the report IRFOL was also represented at the preliminary regional consultations at Cairo and Warsaw, with funding from the Arab Bureau for Education in the Gulf States and DFID.

The second volume in the *World review of distance education and open learning* was published in 2000 and, appropriately, was on *Basic education at a distance*.<sup>16</sup> Our work with the editors both benefited from and fed into our own research and writing for the Dakar forum. After the forum we were also asked by UNESCO to synthesise and report on the findings of a survey of distance learning for basic education that they had carried out in the nine high-population developing-countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan). This work is at present under way and will result in a report for UNESCO and proposals for any appropriate cooperative work by the nine in association with UNESCO.<sup>17</sup>

## **COMMON THEMES**

While our research work has been concentrated in these three areas - higher education, teacher education, and basic education - some of our work necessarily cuts across them. We have, for example, a continuing interest in training. Many of our collaborators have talked with us about the need for training that will develop capacity in research that will, in turn, strengthen their practice as teaching institutions. With the Commonwealth of Learning we hope to move ahead on this front in the next three years. We have, too, an interest in dissemination and publishing and are now making information about our work available both through conventional publishing and through our website.<sup>18</sup> The annual Commonwealth of Learning's *World review* enables us to seek out and publish conclusions from research for the benefit of an international community. From the time of the feasibility study on we have sought opportunities to discuss, and provoke discussion about, research issues in distance education both with those working in distance education and among educators more generally.<sup>19</sup>

At all levels of education we ask, and are asked, questions about the appropriate use of technologies. Some of the answers are in the publications referred to above. A synthesis on the choice of technologies was presented to an educational technology conference in Barbados in November 1999.<sup>20</sup> We were asked to do a more substantial report on *Information and communication technologies for education in the south* as an input to the development of a new White Paper on aid policy in the context of globalisation.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, our major concern remains with policy. Routledge has now published within its distance education series *Open and distance learning in the developing world*, which draws heavily on IRFOL's work and is the first attempt to analyse and synthesise developing-country experience for twenty years.<sup>22</sup> The next volume in the *World review* will be on policy for open and distance learning, seeking to put together guidance on policy options for educational planners in using open and distance learning at all levels of education.<sup>23</sup>

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### **International Steering Group**

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- Professor David Bridges *Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, UK*
- Professor Christopher Colclough *Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK*
- 'Dato Professor G Dhanarajan *President, Commonwealth of Learning, Canada*
- Professor Tony Dodds *Director, Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia*
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- Dr Ros Morpeth *Director, National Extension College, UK*
- Professor the Hon. Rex Nettleford *Vice-Chancellor, University of the West Indies*
- Lord Perry of Walton *founding Vice-Chancellor of the Open University, UK*
- Dr Michael Richardson *Director of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, UK*
- Mr William Renwick *Former Director General of Education, New Zealand*
- Professor Naomi Sargant *Founding Senior Commissioning Editor, Education, Channel Four and visiting Professor, Open University, Quality Support Centre, UK*
- Dr Barbara Spronk *Executive Director, International Extension College, UK*
- Lord Young of Dartington *Director, Institute of Community Studies, UK*

### **Staffing**

The principal staff of IRFOL have been:

- Dr Hilary Perraton, Director
- Dr Charlotte Creed, Research Fellow
- Honor Carter, Secretary
- Imre Goller MBE, Honorary Treasurer
- Thomas Hülsmann, Research Officer 1996-1998
- Dr Palitha Edirisingha, Research Fellow 1997-2000

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