

INTRODUCTION

This revised survey has been carried out by the International Extension College at the request of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Its aim is to put together basic information about the use of correspondence education by university, government and other non-profit making organisations within the Commonwealth. Thus it is a factual rather than a critical document, and does not discuss the major questions of how best to use correspondence education, or whether it is an appropriate tool for use today. Its aim is more modest: to serve as a starting point for co-operation between Commonwealth institutions and to provide an up-to-date reference document.

Each entry gives comparable information about the institutions concerned, together with a brief factual account of its work. These have been compiled from information provided by the institutions themselves in response to enquiries made to them by the IEC. In some cases, institutions have not supplied new information to that published in the first edition. Where there is no indication that these colleges have closed the entry has been retained, but the date of compilation, supplied for every entry, gives an indication as to the present reliability of the information.

The use made of correspondence education reflects the history of the countries concerned. Thus, in Australia and Canada, where distance has been a major constraint on educational development, correspondence has long been seen as a normal part of the activity of universities and Ministries of Education. Naturally, it still has its critics: some argue that even if it is the best thing that can be done for students in a remote situation, it is still only a second best. Nevertheless, it clearly has a place within the state system of education - a place denied it in Britain until the recent establishment of the Open University. The late date of this move has meant that the University could, from the beginning, embrace a range of methods of communication so that it now has a more closely integrated system of 'distance teaching' than any other institution in the Commonwealth. The picture is different again in the developing countries of the Commonwealth. Here, the impetus to use correspondence education has been mainly an economic one: it looked, to many countries, as if correspondence might offer a way of expanding and improving the educational system more quickly, and more cheaply, than any other method. As a result, the developing countries of the Commonwealth have established a whole range of correspondence institutions. Unlike Britain, these have been predominantly state institutions and have been closely integrated with the rest of the state systems of education.

Correspondence has generally been used to meet conventional educational demands, and has followed existing school, college or university syllabuses. In many countries a high proportion of correspondence students are themselves teachers: correspondence is being used as one of the principal ways of upgrading teachers in several African Commonwealth countries while in both Australia and New Zealand, qualified but non-graduate teachers have been among the largest groups studying for degrees by correspondence. But there are important exceptions; in both Canada and New Zealand there are agricultural courses offered by correspondence: in Australia and New Zealand correspondence has played an important role in technical education, in parallel with the work of conventional technical colleges. Britain and New Zealand have trade unions using correspondence education for the benefit of their members. In Africa correspondence is beginning to be used for non-formal and adult education more generally. Thus the experience of the Commonwealth suggests that correspondence education can be a flexible medium,

meeting the needs of students in a wide variety of subjects and levels, ranging from school to postgraduate work. Practical subjects, however, present problems which remind correspondence educators of the need to work in co-operation with other parts of the educational system.

The long traditions of correspondence education - stretching back over nearly a century in some cases - mean that many institutions concentrate on lessons sent through the post. It is only quite recently that attempts have begun to link correspondence teaching with broadcasts in order to overcome some of the difficulties inherent in correspondence study by itself. But, over the last few years, a fair amount of experience of 'mixed media' courses has been built up at levels ranging from postgraduate (as in New South Wales), undergraduate (now most strikingly at the Open University) to school level. Financial and other constraints have limited what can be done in this way: broadcasts often appear to be more expensive to produce than correspondence lessons while broadcasters and educators round the world have grappled with the competing demands of education and other users of air time. Correspondence courses have been linked with both radio and television broadcasts: it is perhaps worth noting that the choice of medium has not always been an easy one, and has been influenced by the fact that, in wealthy countries - and in urban complexes - television has bigger audiences than radio while in poor countries the position is generally reversed.

It is not easy to assess the costs of correspondence education - or any other kind of education for that matter. What evidence there is, suggests that correspondence education can be substantially cheaper than conventional education although few precise comparisons have been made. *It tends to be cheaper partly because of economies of scale and partly because correspondence needs fewer buildings, and less capital investment, than traditional education. It can make use of educational facilities at times when they would otherwise be lying idle and, more important, enable a teacher to reach more students. Again, where comparisons have been made, correspondence students seem to perform as well as other part-time students in examinations, which offer some crude measure of their success within a formal education system.

One of the concerns of those trying to promote Correspondence Education is to prevent inefficient and possibly unscrupulous colleges tarnishing the good record of the medium. For this reason the existence of the International Council for Correspondence Education and a number of regional associations such as the African Association for Correspondence Education is to be welcomed. But the Commonwealth Secretariat believes that more precise supervision needs to be exercised to ensure that high standards are maintained. In some countries the Ministry of Education takes responsibility for this control but in many the position is less clear. Therefore, Commonwealth countries may be interested in the Council for the Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges (UK) whose terms of reference are given in Appendix 1 as an example for similar bodies elsewhere. A list of the colleges accredited by the Council is supplied in Appendix 2 to indicate that the selection of Correspondence Institutions covered by this survey in no way judges the efficiency of those omitted. The publication of similar lists by Councils for Accreditation in each Commonwealth country would give added confidence to students considering this form of study and allow the potential of this educational medium to be more fully utilised.

* Judy El-Bushra (1973)