

OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN MONGOLIA: POSSIBLE RELEVANCE OF OPEN ACCESS

Batchuluun Yembuu

Introduction

Mongolia is a country with a vast steppe and is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world with an area of 1.5 million sq. km and population of 2.5 million. The 57.0 percent of the population lives in urban areas (half in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar) while 43.0 percent in rural. The main spoken language is Mongolian as a mother tongue. GDP per capita was 384 USD in 1999 and 605 USD in 2004 and Mongolia places the 114th in the world for its human development index.

Educational rate of the population is comparatively higher than other developing countries in the region, and according to the census of 2000, adult literacy rate was 97.8 percent (in which 97.5 percent is male and 98.0 percent is female). However, the children who dropped out of school in the beginning of 1990s has already became “adults illiterates” which was eliminated 1970s.

The most of the out of school children (81 percent) are in rural areas, and 71 percent of them are boys. In rural areas, children tend to drop out of school to help their parents and pasture, but for the urban children cause is that of migration from rural areas and poverty.

Non formal education as a type of open education was approved by the Law of Education in 1991 and set up in order to provide equal opportunities to education services for the certain part of the population who are unable to get involved in formal education, especially for herdsmen, school-dropouts and youths.

Open and Distance Education Development in Mongolia

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is the main feature of education for this new century. ODL has considerable potential for meeting diverse learning needs in Mongolia and suitable form of education access to the population who have a quite good literacy rate even sparsely living and weak of infrastructure.

Currently, many projects and programs have been implemented on ODL for example: the project “Gobi Women” on non formal and distance education was jointly implemented by the Government of Mongolia and UNESCO, funded mostly by DANIDA (Danish International Development Assistance) in 1992-1996. A project “Learning for Life” on distance learning which was a continuation of “Gobi Women” project, was implemented from 1997 to 2001, and more than 37.0 thousand people were involved

In the beginning, teaching/learning materials were a combination of print, radio as well as local learning groups and visiting tutors, and family based education for the rural nomadic population, which relevant to the learners’ needs, knowledge and skills. Then added to use TV or video lessons on the distance education and currently, more ICT -oriented CDs and VCD materials we are using.

ODL materials are being distributed through NFE Centers and they are available to use free of charge and copy.

Innovation of Open and Distance Education

In recent years, ODL is being widely utilized in field of formal education, vocational and in-service trainings, although the largest and most substantial use of distance education so far has been for non-formal education.

Internet based or online distance learning is one of the main forms of distance education innovations in Mongolia. Several universities and institutions are started to use the Internet based distance learning and there are several national companies that develops the distance education software programs. However, delivering the Internet based distance learning is more easily accessible in the urban areas than in the rural areas where the computer supplement, power resource, and network connection to Internet is not often available. To solve this problem, two-ways-distance learning network was established in 2004 which is being used in-service teacher training in rural areas and 15 aimag centers connected to this network recently. (An aimag is an administrative unit like a province).

Challenges and ways to overcome

- ◆ The communications infrastructure is weak and resources scarce with low levels of disposable income. Countryside households have electricity though this prone to cuts. Telephone access is low outside of Ulaanbaatar, however cellular telephone network has reached every aimag centres. Radio has national coverage by the state-owned Mongol Radio from Ulaanbaatar and there are local radio stations, increasing in number in recent years. Television is available in the urban and most of rural areas. Therefore, radio and television are still the most relevant media for nationwide education.
- ◆ Computers are few in the provinces though now common in the capital city; but personal ownership is low. Internet access became available in Mongolia in 1996 but the cost of use is still high. However, usage of computers has been increasing relatively rapidly since 1990s. For example, as of 1995 there were no households that owned computers, yet now most households of middle and higher classes own computers in the city and some of them are provided with the internet access.
- ◆ For secondary school's ICT class, about 25 students share one computer to practice on. Internet access and usage in secondary schools is low while the Universities and colleges have better. Open Access is available from libraries in Ulaanbaatar city and Internet cafes. Most offices in capital city have dial-up or 24 hour Internet connection of low speed. Fortunately, Internet cafe's fee has been reducing, now at about 10 cents per an hour. However, as mentioned above, GDP per capita is 605 USD, or less than \$2 per day.
- ◆ Open Access is more available for people who know foreign language. For instance, there is a library with access to 3000 journals from USA but the language barrier is big problem for the users. (English has been becoming popular since the beginning of 1990's, it is the second foreign language as well as Russian). Middle age people with higher education use Russian websites but Russian is not popular among the young generation.

- ◆ Recent years have seen the growth of independent publishers and competitive pricing in print production, in contrast to the single state-owned publishing house of pre-transition times. Electronic publishing is at the beginning stage for public literature.
- ◆ The cost of distance learning is obviously much higher than what we imagine. We know from our experience developing of various learning materials costs the most, especially developing of learning materials for those people who has low education level. If curriculum developers can use the materials in English, Open Access materials would be helpful in the field of education.
- ◆ Long-term system of academic centered learning had formed ready-use type of attitude among the people, yet no skills of self-studying by using learning materials which replacing teachers and, no skills in maintaining personal relationship to others were developed and not prepared to think creatively and for decision making restrict an intensive development of distance learning.

Conclusions

The following achievements resulted from the fact that open and distance education is established and is being used widely in both formal and non-formal education field:

Approaches to environment of lifelong education for adults. Distance education is capable of reaching large numbers of remote learners and of providing a structure to support isolated learners wherever they are, thus increasing access and equity in educational provision. It can provide good quality learning materials on a large scale and it can be a cost-effective way of providing education and training, if appropriately designed. If good example and design in other countries or regions are published on the Open Access journals we would make adaptation in our case.

Using Radio and TV for Distance Learning has changed the people's understanding of radio's and TV's as just the information tools.

Education Usage Has Increased when students started to obtain the knowledge with appropriate form to their needs from learning materials, thus students are not just learning, they are rather learning to use them for their lives. Internet access will help students and learners to develop skills on "learning to learn" or self-learning skills.

Participation of Stakeholders and a Civil Society has Increased. Results in opportunity to implement a training, which conducted for a certain group of people such as a professional training, a field of agriculture etc and let people realize that distance education is not job for only education centers and schools.

Forming a National Structure and Network for Distance Learning. Especially, NFE "Enlightenment" centers to provide the population with continuous education service, in every soum (small settlement centre) of the country are a clear example of that. Currently, these centers not yet connected to the Internet and teachers or facilitators of these centers are unable to use the Internet as well. If we change this situation it will definitely break down the infrastructure barriers in Mongolia, and Open Access may gain in relevance.

References

- Department for National Statistics. (2000). *Census for housing and population*.
- MECS. (2002). *Statistical book of MECS*. Ulaanbaatar.
- MECS & UNESCO. (2003). *Education for All issues in Mongolia*. Ulaanbaatar.
- MECS & ADB. (2003). *Education sector development program*. Ulaanbaatar.
- National Centre for Non Formal and Distance Education. (2005). *Research on the distance learning to the formal and non formal education*. Ulaanbaatar .
- Oyunchimeg, D & Robinson, B. (1999). *Open and distance learning for literacy in Mongolia*.
- Rassekh, S. (1991). *Perspective on literacy: A selected world bibliography*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Robinson, B. & Solongo, A. (2000). *The gender dimension of economic transition in Mongolia*. Ulaanbaatar.
- Robinson, K. & Otgonbayar, G. (2003). *Final evaluation report of "Learning for Life" project*. Ulaanbaatar
- United Nations Development Program. (2003). *Human development report: Mongolia 2003*.
- Urban-Rural Disparities in Mongolia*. (2004). Ulaanbaatar.

Batchuluun Yembuu is Director of the National Centre for Non Formal and Distance Education, Mongolia