

OPENING DOORS TO THE 'LESS PRIVILEGED' The Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the results of a survey study that investigated the profile of typical Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) learner and contribution made by MCA in the provision of access to tertiary education by marginalised groups. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used and data was collected through a questionnaire and interview schedule from 102 randomly selected MCA distance learners and one female interviewee. The respondents were drawn from 6 undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Descriptive data analysis was mainly used, including frequency distribution tables, graphs and figures.

The results of this study indicate that there are more female enrollees than males at MCA, since three out of every four MCA learners are females. A significant number of MCA learners are mature working adults and a majority of these learners are from less privileged income groups. The survey also shows that women generally consider ODL to be compatible with motherhood and job constraints, while most respondents view MCA programmes as affording them a second chance. In addition, many of the respondents find the cost of MCA programmes affordable.

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. Since its establishment in 1971, democratising access to education through mass media has been the *raison d'être* of the Mauritius College of the Air. Over the years, ODL, as the 'golden goose' of the developing world (Perraton, 2000) has laid flexible methodologies for higher learning, 'hatching' benefits for adults seeking to learn differently at their convenience. The continuing appeal of MCA ODL methodology lies in its self-learning materials, which enable self-paced learning anywhere anytime.

The study reported in this article was based on two key research questions:

- who is the typical MCA learner?
- what makes the ODL mode germane to this type of learner?

One hundred and two (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.

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, audio-

visual, and ICT-mediated self-learning reference materials to those separated by time and space from those who are teaching. Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) programmes are delivered mostly through print materials supported by weekly/ fortnightly tutoring at learner-friendly times. The new generation of MCA programmes is offered through state of the art teleconferencing.

Open and distance learning (ODL), the so-called 'golden goose of the developing world' (Perraton, 2000), has presented MCA with 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 doorsteps.

The term 'less privileged' refers to individuals who have few or no opportunities to access higher education due to several challenges, including;

- multiple socio-economic commitments,
- mature age,
- limited financial means, and
- 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). Such learners would be deprived of their right to higher education as stated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This paper argues that the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) opens the doors to tertiary education for such 'marginalised' individuals.

MAURITIUS COLLEGE OF THE AIR

Mauritius College of the Air (MCA), a parastatal non-profit institution, has a four-decade long history of democratising education. The MCA was 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). Back in 1972, in his inaugural speech, the first Prime Minister of Mauritius spoke of the MCA's role to 'equalise educational facilities' (Dodds, 1975). MCA attained the status of tertiary institution in 1998. Although distance learning activities were already in place as far back as 1998, the division of distance education was only set up in 1994, with the assistance of the Open University of UK.

GLOBALISATION

Globalisation has increased the internationalisation of higher learning and provided the Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) with the capacity to widen access to higher education at a lesser cost. Through gradual participation in various forms of international collaborations, MCA has benefitted in several ways, including circumvent high costs of course development, reduce course fees, develop its staff, and increase the diversity of professional, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes that cater for diverse 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), and

➤ **Import of programmes.**

Globalisation has also 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 MCA's panoply of undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional programmes, thereby enabling MCA to cater for the needs of more individuals employed in education, business and commerce, medical, and transport domains. The current MCA paradigm is to explore innovative ways of collaboration epitomised by interactive tele-learning programmes that are 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'.

Although funding and staff training provisions are diminishing at MCA, due to global financial crisis, programme provision continues to grow in breadth and scope through involvement in international partnerships. Table 1 below shows the growth in the number and range of partnerships, from three in 2000 to seven by 2010, while the number of programmes has correspondingly increased from 8 to 25 over the same period.

Table1.

International Partnerships and programmes over the past decades

| Year 2000 | | Year 2010 | |
|--|-----------------------------|--|--|
| International Partners | Programmes | International Partners | Programmes |
| Institute of Transport (UK) | Diploma Advanced Diploma | Chartered Institute of Logistics & Transport (UK) | Professional Diploma Advanced Diploma |
| Chartered Institute of Marketing (UK) | CIM | IGNOU | Diploma in Youth in Development Work Diploma in HIV & Family Education |
| IGNOU _DIM | | | BCom BA English BCA MA English PGD-HRM PGD-Distance Education MA Distance Education MCom MBA |
| BCA BTS BCom MBA | | | |
| University of Madras Amity University | | Bachelor in Business Administration MBA International Business Master in Finance and Control Bachelor of Finance & I Analysis | |

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 institutions websites makes this mode of delivery flexible and convenient for working adults.

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.

RESEARCH METHOD

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect data. Collection instruments consisted of a questionnaire survey and 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
- Master's in Business Administration
- MA English.

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:

- gender
- mature age
- lack of conventional formal qualifications, and
- limited financial means.

A structured approach that was preferred covered several key prompts, including

- access problems
- learning motivations and
- appropriateness of ODL.

She will be referred to as Aastha for confidentiality reasons.

FINDINGS

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

- Gender-wise, the composition of the research sample shows that Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) attracts more females (73.5%) than males

- The distribution by age suggests that there are slightly more mature learners (51%) who are aged above 35 years
- A typical MCA learner is employed, since 98 (96%) of the 102 respondents reported that they were working
- A majority (67.6%) of learners earn a salary of less than Rs20 000 per month
- Most learners have high entry qualifications, except for 10% that does not have A-levels.

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

Empowering Women

Women learners considerably outnumbered their male counterparts; nearly three-quarters (73.5%) of the sample comprised female learners. The chart below shows the number of male and female learners tally out of 102.

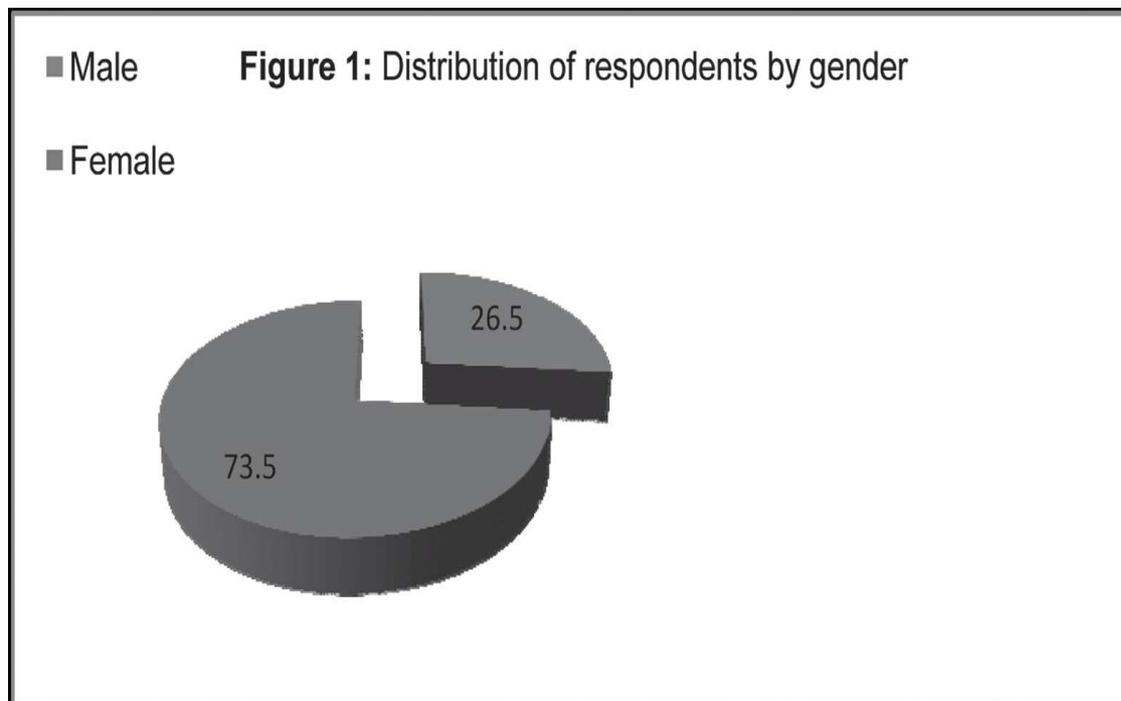


Figure 1.
Distribution of respondents by gender

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) 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 female enrolment rate at undergraduate level with that at postgraduate level reveals that there were nearly four times as many women in enrolled on Undergraduate (79%) than postgraduate programmes (21%). This is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

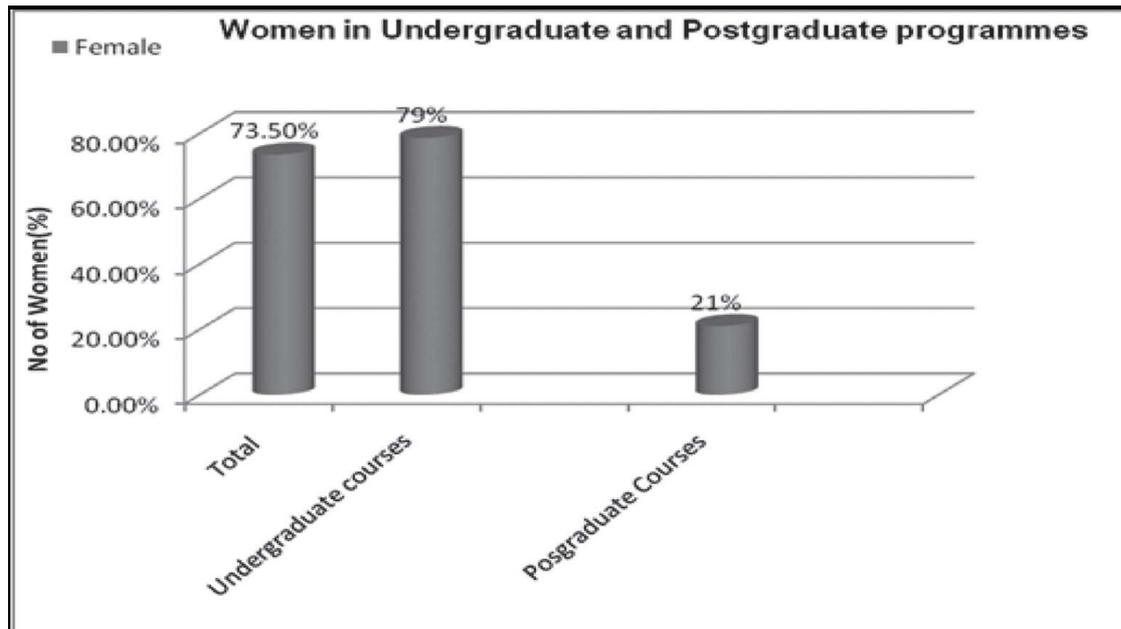


Figure 2.
Female learners in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes

The greater participation of women in undergraduate studies appears to be a global trend, as attested by Pryzmus (2004, cited in Kwapong 2007), who asserts that women are more likely than men to interrupt formal studies for parenthood. As a result many women are easily constrained by their diverse parental, household, and work obligations that ODL is their 'first chance' to university education (Reuss, 1994, cited in Kwapong 2007). 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.

Empowering Mature Learners

More than half (51%) of those surveyed are aged over 35, 10% are above 50, while 96% of the sample comprises working learners. ODL literature abounds on the appropriateness of this mode for adult learners (Knowles 1990 cited in Kwapong, 2007). This is also confirmed by the current study which shows that 68.6% of the learners said they opted for ODL due to its flexibility. ODL self-learning materials enable busy adults to study at their convenience and pace. Moreover, tutorial timings at Mauritius College of the Air (MCA), which take place on Saturdays and/or weekdays and 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 using andragogical strategies that are appropriate for the learning style of adults (Knowles 1990, cited in Thomas & Soares, 2009).

Nearly half (46%) of the respondents stated 'other commitments' as reasons for late entry to higher education. It is surmised that financial constraints could have been a deterrent. According to Thomas and Soares (2009), there seems to be modest correlation between mature age of learners and low socio-economic status. The humble economic background of our learners will be discussed in the ensuing section.

Empowering The Economically-Disadvantaged

Cost is frequently adduced as a factor that inhibits less well-off learners from pursuing higher education, leading to disparity of opportunity among social classes (Thomas & Soares 2009). ODL reduces the cost of learning and debunks the 'exclusivity' of higher education (ICDE, 2009). This is supported by the current study, which shows that 49% of the respondents indicated that they would not have been able to afford another programme. Cost, it would seem, is an important push factor as evidenced in another recent Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) survey, on those enrolling on Amity programmes, which showed that 43% admitted cost affordability as a prime attraction.

Interestingly our survey revealed that 67.6% of the respondents earn less than Rs20 000 monthly – an amount close to the current non-taxable income group (Rs19 700) decreed by the Mauritius Revenue Authority. At the same time, 42% of the respondents earn less than Rs15 000. The following table shows the income profile of the learners surveyed.

Table 2.
Income group of learners surveyed (N=102)

| | Undergraduate/ Diploma Programmes | | Postgraduate Programmes | | Total | |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|------|----------------------------|------|-------|-------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| less than 15 000 | 40 | 50.0 | 3 | 13.6 | 43 | 42.2 |
| 15 000-20 000 | 20 | 25.5 | 6 | 27.3 | 26 | 25.5 |
| 21 000-30 000 | 9 | 11.3 | 9 | 40.9 | 18 | 17.6 |
| 31 000-40 000 | 7 | 8.8 | 1 | 4.5 | 8 | 7.8 |
| above 40 000 | 2 | 2.5 | 1 | 4.5 | 3 | 2.9 |
| N/A | 2 | 2.5 | 2 | 9.2 | 4 | 3.9 |
| Total | 80 | 78.4 | 22 | 21.6 | 102 | 100.0 |

It would seem that diploma/undergraduate learners earn less than postgraduate ones, since only 18 (22.5%) of the 80 undergraduate learners earn above Rs21 000 compared with 50% of postgraduate learners who earn as much. This suggests that there is a relationship between earnings and educational qualifications. Another interesting fact is that only a minority earn more than Rs40 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.

Empowering the Qualifications-Challenged

Of the 102 respondents, only 10% did not have A-levels. They were able to access Diploma programmes and BSc Management through alternative qualifications and/ or recognition of work experience. These alternative routes, including the MCA-designed Certificate in Librarianship and Information Science and the Diploma in Management, aim "to bridge" the A-levels gap. These access routes have created opportunities for those

debarred entry to higher learning, giving them a chance to improve their socio-economic status. Aastha's story will exemplify this further.

Aastha

Our 44-year old telephone interviewee, Aastha, was considered in this study as the voice of the less-privileged learners who are empowered through ODL.

Aastha comes from a low-income rural background. 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 programme on account of her work experience in the pre-primary sector. On completion of her diploma she was given a salary 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 increase 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.

CONCLUSION

The survey has produced a rich yield of data and paved the way for further research on a number of issues. Mauritius College of the Air (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. The conclusion of this study are aligned to Pityana's (cited in ICDE 2009) observation that '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'. Nevertheless, study also shows that 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 Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) to exploit further ODL possibilities.

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