Lisa Waldick
Distance education. Just say the words and a stereotype comes to mind — a system of education that is “second best.”

Many who have only experienced face-to-face education in an institutional setting believe that the quality of education provided through distance education is inferior. However, this is far from true, according to Naveed A. Malik, rector of the Virtual University of Pakistan.

In fact, in Asia, distance education using information and communication technologies (ICTs) is proving to be an efficient way of delivering high-quality education using course materials often developed by the best faculty teams. And by making higher education affordable and accessible, it is helping to address equity issues.

“The basic issue is that we have a huge Asian population mass and a corresponding demand for higher education that the existing number of colleges and universities have no ability to address,” says Malik. “Compounding this problem is the fact that we have a very small supply of qualified faculty. This leads to some serious human resource development issues.”

In Pakistan, for example, only 3% of the country’s 18- to 24-year-olds are enrolled in higher education institutions, says Malik. Part of the problem is that students in the countryside must move to the city to get an education. Many cannot afford this.

Moreover, even students with the resources to attend institutions of higher learning are being turned away at the door. These institutions simply don’t have the physical infrastructure or human resources to cope with the number of youth seeking an education.

Distance education in the information age

Distance education using ICTs could change this. “Distance education has been around for a long time in fact,” says Malik. “But if we add information and communication technologies into the distance education process, we can raise the quality and overcome capacity and affordability problems as well.”
Another critical need in the information age is life-long learning or “retooling.” According to Malik, “ICT-based distance education provides a convenient and efficient vehicle for achieving this. Learners can fulfill their continuing education requirements and acquire new skills without leaving their workplaces,” he says.

Distance education represents a way to capitalize on the skills and talents of the best and brightest educators by recruiting them to help design courses. A high quality program of education can then be developed and implemented countrywide.

In Pakistan, this is easier now that the price of broadband has come down significantly in recent years. Moreover, throughout Asia, the Internet is increasingly available in even the remotest locations.

**Defining the approach**

Malik is leading a project to develop a model for distance education that can be used in various Asian countries, with support from Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Through its Pan Asia Networking (PAN) program initiative, a program on Distance and Open Resource Access — consisting of a series of nine complementary distance learning projects — is being undertaken.

Launched in 2005, the PANdora project, as it is known, is involving researchers from 11 countries (Cambodia, China [Hong Kong], India, Indonesia, Laos, Mongolia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Viet Nam) in the investigation of a broad range of issues.

For example, researchers are looking at how short message systems (SMS) could be used to handle student registration; evaluating various kinds of distance learning software; sharing learning objects; and analyzing how to rigorously e-assess students’ work to ensure high standards. PANdora is administered by the Virtual University of Pakistan and Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia. A faculty member of Canada’s Athabasca University is also on the team.

Effective research is key to making the most of the opportunity presented by distance learning. “You can’t just steam-roll out an educational system and expect it to work,” says Malik. “We need to learn lessons from previous online projects. We need to develop access models and understand how they work and in what circumstances. What instructional activities are most effective for distance learning education? Would the approach that works best for sociology also work best for engineering?"

"We need to look at instructional procedures and design. We are also doing capacity building in the practice of distance learning educational research — this is a brand new field, in fact.” Malik adds that it is important to develop content locally and to provide video–audio interaction with students via the Internet.

Malik is certain that distance learning is making a significant contribution to human resource development in Asia. “One only has to look to India’s emerging power to see the value of a population with more access to higher education,” he comments.

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