



**REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC  
BUREAU REGIONAL DU PACIFIQUE OCCIDENTAL**

**REGIONAL COMMITTEE**

WPR/RC52/8

**Fifty-second session  
Brunei Darussalam  
10-14 September 2001**

31 July 2001

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Provisional agenda item 14

## **OPEN LEARNING**

Open learning has much to offer the countries and areas of the Western Pacific Region. It offers flexibility for both teachers and learners. Students can study at their own pace which makes it an attractive option for continuing education. It encourages collaboration between teachers and learners, between learners and learners, and between educational partners. It opens up opportunities for more isolated parts of the Region to benefit from the globalization of education.

In response to increasing interest in open learning among Member States, particularly from Pacific island countries, WHO is developing a regional strategy for open learning. This document describes the principles and process that will be considered in developing the regional strategy and is presented for the information of the Regional Committee at its fifty-second session.

## **1. CURRENT SITUATION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The Western Pacific Region presents a wide array of political, economic and cultural contexts and an equally varied set of demographic and epidemiological profiles. Of the Region's 37 countries and areas, 29 are located on islands. Most have small land areas and populations, although the Region also includes a number of much larger countries. These variations in size, culture and language are reflected in countries' approaches to educational change and technology.

Countries need high-quality human resources if they are to achieve more efficient, equitable sustainable health services. Teacher training, basic training and continuing education for health professionals, and upgrading of knowledge and skills (including health care management as well as clinical and public health skills) are a key strategic investment. In many countries, the need for skilled human resources is particularly acute because populations and health workers are dispersed and isolated. In such circumstances, the provision of effective high-quality continuing education through open learning may help to stem the migration of health workers to urban centres or abroad.

Open learning offers opportunities to: (1) overcome geographical restrictions; (2) improve training institutions; (3) increase access to information resources and other training institutions; and (4) support and enhance the on-the-job performance of health workers. Open learning also encourages flexible learning and allows educational materials to be adapted to the needs of learners from rural areas.

Designing open learning models that address the needs of health professionals in small islands and remote rural communities is critical. Such workers play a vital role in meeting the needs of at-risk and vulnerable community members, including the poor, chronically ill, young and elderly. It is often very difficult for health professionals serving these communities to update their knowledge and competencies regularly.

### **1.2 Changing technology**

Over the last five years, communications technology has advanced considerably and two-way communication systems are now common. Broadcasting coverage areas have expanded and interactive links between televisions and video equipment, computers, monitors, cellular phones and telephones, pagers and hand-held personal computers have become widely available.

Global networks now allow the transmission of information within WHO and the dissemination of health-related information from sources outside the Region. Links with experienced open learning providers such as the Commonwealth of Learning in Canada and the Australian Distance Education Consortium can now be envisaged. Transmission of material from the London-based Medical Network News, a global closed-user satellite network channel for medical and health information, is being launched in ten countries in the WHO European Region, enabling transmission of events and materials provided by WHO to WHO-designated recipient sites.

## **2. DEVELOPMENT OF A REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR OPEN LEARNING**

### **2.1 Principles**

Planning for open learning must take account of: (1) available, usable and sustainable technology; (2) systems and managerial tools which improve the performance of students, health workers and trainers and educators; (3) established structures of communication and information-sharing across health systems; and (4) advice and support systems, including technological support systems.

WHO's regional strategy for open learning will be developed in collaboration with Member States and international networks, institutions and partner agencies. It will emphasize local development and ownership and the involvement of all relevant ministries, public and private institutions, industry and commerce. WHO's regional strategy for open learning will pay particular attention to:

- ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders, including Ministries of Health and Education; educational institutions; regional and international partner agencies; health planners; health, telecommunications, educational and media experts; students; organizations of health professionals; and target students;
- encouraging and using local structures, initiatives and capacity-building to ensure that affordable, sustainable and user-friendly technologies are used, paying particular attention to the needs of students who are not used to technology;
- ensuring that training and continuing education short courses are formulated in the context of overall national and regional human resources planning;

- using flexible open learning models which permit the adaptation of international and regional courses and materials;
- designing a distance education model which meets the needs and interests of small island countries;
- capacity-building to improve educators' capacity to design interactive open learning courses, in light of increasing access to computer and communication technologies;
- addressing the needs of the target students, including periodic interactions with teachers and other learners; acquisition of study, self-learning and active learning skills; applying theory in order to improve practical skills and clinical competencies; and
- designing an approach to open learning that that can be adapted in future, with the addition of new functions and uses.

If these principles are to be translated into strategic decisions it is critical that modern technology-based tools for learning are assessed and utilized, as appropriate for specific situation of each country, and that planning takes account of anticipated developments in communications technology. For example, learning centres in peripheral areas that are equipped with communications technology can support interactive and collaborative learning at the local level. They can serve as community education centres by, for example, offering interactive English language courses using interactive CD-ROMs or other media. New technologies offer almost unlimited opportunities to strengthen the English language skills of health workers and thereby to greatly expand their opportunities for lifelong learning.

However, new technology cannot correct systemic deficiencies, such as problematic telecommunications infrastructures, insufficient teacher expertise in interactive and alternative teaching-learning methods, or inadequate management structures to support and evaluate health worker performance.

## **2.2 Regional strategy development phases**

The development of a regional strategy for open learning has started with a regional needs assessment and analysis of training and open learning needs, focusing in the first instance on Pacific island countries. The first part of the needs assessment has just been completed for the following

Pacific island countries: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu. The assessment was undertaken by a group of experts in open learning who worked with countries to assess and analyse the educational needs of health professional trainers and learners, review available open learning modes and telecommunications technologies, and propose alternative models suitable for Pacific island countries. The team also reviewed subregional distance education in health currently being carried out by academic institutions, development agencies and Pacific organizations.

The preliminary findings of the needs assessment confirmed several areas of concern which are relevant not only to Pacific island countries but for most other Member States in the Region. These findings include:

- a lack of adequate managerial support;
- low use of technology and weak computer and Internet skills among both learners and teachers;
- the need to retrain academic, management and administrative staff;
- the time required for printed, audiovisual and technical teaching and learning programmes to be developed and the limited capacities of training institutions to implement modern educational technologies;
- limited telecommunications and other infrastructure;
- a monopoly of local service providers and high transmission costs; and
- the need for network and equipment maintenance.

The needs assessment had the following recommendations for the regional strategy:

- open learning systems must be developed that integrate mentoring, tutoring and clinical opportunities with technology-based learning;
- tutors and mentors must visit learners and learners must come to a central training site;
- the focus must be on flexible open learning (any time, any place, any medium);

- relationships must be built between health care and education sectors for common distance education needs;
- the requirements of health care, education and government sectors must be aggregated in order to achieve lower telecommunication costs and improved service;
- open learning delivery must be coordinated with improvements to information systems and data collection;
- human resources capacity, including knowledge about open learning opportunities, must be built in the Ministry of Health;
- continuous learning and distance education must be connected to the goal of retaining skilled health workers and reducing emigration; and
- the sustainability of open learning initiatives must be ensured by establishing a sound basis and coordination with all partners.

These findings and implications will be taken into account in drafting the overall regional strategy for open learning. The strategy will seek to ensure the development of a financially viable, sustainable and comprehensive approach to open learning for health professionals; the production of high-quality learning programmes of an international standard appropriate for the needs of participating countries; and the development of accompanying infrastructure to facilitate networking among educational institutions for health professionals in the Region. In addition, the strategy will support the sharing and adaptation of international and local courses.

When the needs assessment is completed, a consultation will be held with participants from the Pacific island countries, and representatives of the other stakeholders involved in open learning to discuss the assessment. This will provide further input into the regional strategy. An action plan will then be drawn up for Pacific island countries.

The next phase of the regional strategy will begin with recommendations for open learning courses, activities and events; the identification of existing, suitable and relevant open learning materials and courses; the writing and production of course materials; the identification of health related information networks which can be accessed for learning material; the design of an accreditation system; and the strengthening of human resources capacity building. This stage will include both arrangements to license material from existing providers and negotiations to minimize

communications costs. Attempts will be made to identify (1) sources of educational material that is appropriate for the range of health workers in each of the target countries, and (2) technologies, methods and languages that are compatible with local conditions. Programme evaluation tools will also be designed.

The implementation phase will include the delivery of courses, using a variety of delivery modes. Recipients of the courses will include learners at learning centres in peripheral areas.

Later, the work will focus on monitoring and evaluation and will include evaluations of effectiveness, standards, costs, competencies of trainers and facilitators, and learner outcomes. It will also assess the extent to which open learning programmes for primary health care workers in rural and isolated areas have enhanced the motivation, commitment and retention of these health workers.

Some important lessons have already been learned from the needs assessment carried out in the Pacific. These lessons are generally applicable to other countries in the Region. They are also consistent with the principles of open learning based on experiences worldwide.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The development of the regional strategy for open learning will make use of all available learning and performance support resources, relevant to the specific needs of each country, including technologies such as audio and video as well as new and emerging computer and communications technologies.

The future development of open learning will require close collaboration with governments, educational institutions and suppliers of both communications technology and services. The major objective of such collaboration must be achieving improvements in the health of the populations served, through improvements in training, knowledge and educational resources of health care professionals. Evaluation of the programmes delivered to these health workers will assess whether changes have been made to clinical practice in response to the education that has been provided.

The regional strategy for open learning now being developed aims to strengthen the knowledge and competencies of all categories of health workers. In the long term, an effective open

learning strategy will lead to improvements in the quality of health services, and in the planning and efficiency of health care. In future the open learning infrastructure and partnerships may be extended to community education and health promotion and, eventually, to telemedicine.

Careful initial design and built-in flexibility are essential. Technology-based strategies must be linked to goals and resources and reflect the needs of health workers and the populations they serve.

The consultation on open learning for the Pacific island countries will be held in October 2001. As well as providing further guidance for the regional strategy, the consultation will identify the main components of an action plan for open learning in the Pacific. This will be followed by a review of country experiences in open learning and a needs analysis in countries in other parts of the Region, which will also be used in formulating the regional strategy.