



CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

Impact in distance education

Sushita Gokool-Ramdoe



Dr Sushita Gokool-Ramdoe was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 1997 and pursued a MA in Education and International Development at the UCL Institute Of Education. She is currently employed at the Tertiary Education Commission in Mauritius, and leads on the distance education regulatory function as well as national and institutional policy development. Additionally, as former Coordinator for the Working Group on Distance Education & Open Learning of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) she has managed an international portfolio in distance education across Africa. Sushita also has considerable experience in providing technical assistance to governmental and international organizations including the ADEA, UNESCO, UNDP, the Indian Ocean Commission and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL).

Career trajectory

At the time that she was awarded the Commonwealth Scholarship, Sushita was employed as a Lecturer at the Mauritius College of the Air and part of a team working on the establishment of a distance education system for the country; an initiative supported by the African Development Bank. During the course of this work a deficit in distance education expertise was identified and Sushita was motivated to apply for a Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue a master's degree at the UCL Institute of Education (IoE) to expand her understanding of distance learning theory, research and practice.

Sushita stated that her decision to apply for postgraduate studies was driven by her goal to contribute to the distance education agenda in Mauritius and the application process was simplified as her area of study fell under the Mauritian government's priority fields of study. There was therefore provision for paid leave at a national level. Her employer was supportive of her decision to pursue a postgraduate qualification in the UK as she was expected to contribute towards the advancement of distance education in the region, in both higher education and adult learning for development. However Sushita described that there were some administrative difficulties before the final approval for her leave was granted.

After the completion of her award Sushita returned to her role at the Mauritius College of the Air and focussed on

designing and managing distance education programs, including capacity building for part-time tutors and the development of non-formal adult education programs. She found reintegration challenging as she had gained a broader perspective on the application of distance education but felt restricted within the confines of her role.

Four years after returning from the UK Sushita was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to pursue further postgraduate studies at Pennsylvania State University, USA. She identified her previous exposure as a scholar in the UK as an important factor in being awarded the Fulbright scholarship. She later went on to gain a Doctorate in Education (Policy Development & Quality Assurance) from the University of South Australia.

In 2003 Sushita joined the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), the Mauritian higher education regulatory body. In this role she has managed local and international portfolios, including the coordination of activities of the Working Group on Distance Education & Open Learning of the ADEA and maintaining linkages with other organisations like the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA) and the COL. She has also worked in a regulatory capacity to supervise the transformation of her previous employer, the Mauritius College of the Air, to an open university and developed the TEC distance education policy which has been welcome by the South African Development Community (SADC) Centre for Distance Education as a first for the SADC

region. Her current focus is largely on the development of distance-education regulation, including an open educational resources (OER) policy and platform and an academic credit accumulation and transfer system for Mauritius. Sushita described her international role in particular, which is focused on distance education for international development, as an opportunity to fully utilise her knowledge from the time that she spent at the IoE.

Sushita has also been advisor to the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development on issues related to environment education policy. In this position, she employed distance education theory and methodologies to develop an environmental literacy framework. She also provided technical assistance to a consultancy firm engaged in the formulation of a sustainable development framework for the Prime Minister's Office.

In November 2013 Sushita was awarded the Woman Leader Award for Distance Education in Africa, as part of the African Women Leadership Awards.

Knowledge and skills

For Sushita, a key learning outcome from her time on award was gaining an insight into the application of distance education in international development and the realisation that the field encompasses more than designing instructional materials and supporting individual students through their studies. She developed an understanding of the role that distance education can play in tackling issues related to gender equality, poverty reduction, health and environment and also noted that she gained invaluable knowledge from her fellow students, who had experience of working at organisations including the UK's Department for International Development, the World Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Her interactions with them highlighted issues related to donor agencies, securing funding, writing project proposals etc. and an understanding of these areas and the expertise she developed whilst on award broadened the scope of her interventions after her return to work. Additionally modules on women and education and adult learning in developing countries expanded her perspective on the applications of distance education for sustainable development and she began to see this as a means to scale education initiatives by reaching a wider audience.

My expectations were exceeded as it was a very practical degree and made me understand how distance education could be applied to development areas

To conduct research for the dissertation, Sushita returned home to conduct fieldwork and investigated the potential of distance education to empower housewives. The research findings from her project were utilised after she returned to work on the implementation of a program developed by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) for beneficiaries of the Mauritian Ministry of Women. Findings from her study enabled the IGNOU certificate course

Empower Women through Self-Help Groups to be adapted for the Mauritian context.

Development impact

As part of her work in directing distance education in Mauritius, Sushita has led the development and formulation of the Tertiary Education Commission's (TEC) distance education policy. She noted that this provided practitioners with practical guidelines for institutional policy development and lead to an improved understanding of the scope of distance education. As an example she highlighted the interest of the University of Mauritius in reorienting its approach to distance education provision to bring the institutional policy in line with the TEC guidelines. Sushita expects that this move away from a policy deficit will contribute to systemic and coordinated distance education practice nationally and lead to improved effectiveness and efficiency of resource utilization.

Additionally, Sushita is responsible for the management of the TEC's Distance Education Coordination Committee, comprising of 19 organisations nationally, including ministries, universities and other institutions engaged in formal and non-formal aspects of distance education. Through this channel, she is working on quality assurance mechanisms for programs delivered through distance education approaches.

Commonwealth award

Reflecting on her Commonwealth award and the outcomes from her time in the UK, Sushita emphasised the positive impact that the scholarship had on her career progression. She noted that her expertise in the distance education field can be attributed to the scholarship and, comparing her career progression to colleagues who did not benefit from the same opportunity, her own career benefited from a boost due to her exposure at the IoE and the contacts that she made whilst in the UK.

More about Sushita's work

Publications:

http://www.commissionoceanindien.org/fileadmin/resource/s/Connectivite_numerique/S4Suchita_Gokool_Ramdoo.pdf

http://www.adeanet.org/triennale/Triennalestudies/subthem e1/1_4_06_Gokool-Ramdoo_en.pdf

<http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/702/1344>

<http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/541/1151>

<http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/264/430>

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