

INTRODUCTION

Professor W.K. Marshall

Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Non-Campus Countries and Distance Education

This special issue of *Caribbean Curriculum* on distance education comes at an auspicious time for The University of the West Indies, and indeed for the broader educational systems of the Caribbean. The University has engaged in forms of distance education for a good while, but in 1992/93 it took one of the most momentous of the many radical decisions that have marked its recent years, the decision to go 'dual mode,' to give distance education an equally important place in its delivery of all kinds of programmes as traditional on-campus instruction. To assist in this transition, the University secured a substantial loan from the Caribbean Development Bank and, after a slow start, its aim to begin significant expansion of distance education programmes will be realised when, in September 1997, complete degrees in Management Studies and Agribusiness will be offered, soon to be followed by other programmes in Engineering, Education, Natural Sciences and Medical Sciences.

The potentialities of distance education for reaching students, while giving them much greater control over the rest of their lives, have been recognised elsewhere in Caribbean education. In Jamaica's extensive restructuring of secondary education, distance education has been playing its part. Trinidad and Tobago plans to follow suit in upgrading its teaching force. Teacher training in the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) has also used elements that belong in distance education.

Aspiring lawyers and other professionals in the Caribbean have for long studied their subjects through London University's external degree programme. Nowadays, many other distance education providers compete for students throughout the region, thereby catering to some of those who cannot get the training they want through the regional University or the other national institutions.

Given all this flourishing of distance education at different levels and in different disciplines, and given the often uncritical enthusiasm generated by recent innovations such as the Internet, it is appropriate that the community of educational scholars in the region should be

given this opportunity to reflect on, and analyse, the potentials and the problems of distance education, as they manifest themselves in the idiosyncrasies of the Caribbean context. Distance education promises much, but it is not a panacea. We need to understand the variety subsumed under the simple term, and to appreciate the limitations of these types of instruction just as much as their advantages; we need to comprehend the pros and cons of many different technologies that can help deliver distance education; we need to get a grasp of the hidden costs, as well as the manifest benefits. I trust that the contributors to this volume will play a part in deepening the dialogue that must continue throughout the region as we collectively consider how to provide quality education to the widest possible audience, within the financial and other resource constraints we face.