

Post Secondary Education in Kiribati: improving access, opportunity and quality through flexible and open approaches¹

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Abstract

This paper highlights some major problems and needs of the national post secondary training institutions in Kiribati and attempts to seek alternatives that will not only improve their operation and management systems for quality outputs, but also, equally important, improve and increase opportunities for and access to higher education. To this end, the paper looks at some more innovative approaches to education, such as open and flexible learning and forming partnerships between the providers and stakeholders, government and the private sectors, the home and the school. The paper then discusses the prospects of meeting the ever-increasing training needs of today and also of preparing our children for the even greater challenges of the 21st Century.

Background

There are several post-secondary institutions in Kiribati; the Kiribati Teachers' College (KTC), the Tarawa Technical Institute (TTI), the Nursing School, the Marine Training Centre (MTC), the Fisheries Training Centre (FTC) and the University of the South Pacific Centre (USP Centre). Their role is to provide the employment needs in both the public and private sectors. In other words, they are responsible for creating and producing

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the labour source with the necessary skills, in particular the expertise aligned to the employment needs of the government.

The KTC, the TTI and the Nursing school were the first to be established during the colonial days in the 1950s. The MTC was set up in 1967 and has a reasonable degree of autonomy. The FTC was established in 1989 and since its relocation from MTC to where it is now, there has been an increase in the number of graduates employed on foreign fishing boats. The USP Extension Services, now known as the University Extension, Kiribati Centre, was established at its present site in 1978 and since then it has been offering the pre-degree, degree and Continuing Education courses through a mixed delivery mode of Distance Education (DE) and face to face teaching. The USP Centre has grown from a handful of students, mainly civil servants, to the hundreds of young school leavers who missed out on the selection to form 6 or 7, not because they did not do well, but because of the limited number of places at the schools. In 1998, the Centre's enrolment figures stood at 1388 made up of 753 in semester one and 635 in semester two. As expected, more than 50% of the total enrolment were doing pre-degree studies.

The Present Situation

It is almost 20 years since Kiribati's independence and it is only proper that we stop and take stock of the education system and ask ourselves:

Has the present system been coping well, particularly at the tertiary level, in meeting the educational and training needs?

If not, then:

What kind of education system should we be looking for to suit the development needs of today and, more importantly in preparing our children for the challenges of the 21st Century?

Our post-secondary institutions have not changed much since their establishment. The programs offered, however, have increased and so too has the number of graduates. However, despite these increases, the World Bank Report (1992) on post-secondary institutions says “the undersupply of graduates still exists and will continue to exist for more years to come”. The Report claims this is due to the low academic standard of secondary students and the limited number of successful Form 7 students. It also says that those who were accepted for tertiary studies were very often ill-prepared, entering the tertiary stage with an inadequate educational foundation. This is due partly to the underfinancing and partly to the incomplete coverage of primary and secondary education.

Another problem highlighted in the Report is:

... the weak planning, budgeting and management capacity which resulted in a proliferation of training programs often set up to meet the immediate needs of the public sector and not based on the analysis of long term costs and benefits. These efforts have resulted in small insufficient systems with low quality output and high unit costs.

Education should be a continuous process right across all levels, including the home. It is vital, therefore, that a strong foundation is laid, especially during the formative years. Many people have an important role to play in this process.

Molnar (1995:139), in her studies undertaken for UNESCO, quotes a research finding by Griffiths and Higginson on Pacific education:

... the difficulties facing the primary sector are having considerable impact on the retention of students at

higher levels of education. This is because Pacific primary education is often not providing the foundation or learning skills necessary for students to complete secondary and tertiary education.

Kiribati is no exception.

The important message here is that we cannot improve the quality of tertiary graduates or even increase access and opportunity to higher education unless we improve primary and secondary education.

As far as our national post-secondary institutions are concerned, there are key areas that need immediate attention.

- i There is a need to rationalise the management and financing of all national post-secondary institutions to ensure cost effectiveness and efficiency.
- ii There is a need to attach more importance to quality programs, staffing and infrastructure
- iii There is a need to rationalise the learning/teaching pedagogy to economise the available resources to their maximum potential by adopting more dynamic, flexible and open learning strategies.
- iv There is a need to revolutionise education and put the onus on the people rather than government alone, by forming partnerships so each partner is equally responsible for the education of its own children and their development in general.

These ideas are nothing new, but repetitions of resolutions of many other reports and conferences over the past years. I hope what comes out of this conference is not just another report to read, but will form the basis of our Education Strategic Plans for the next 20 years or so.

Kiribati in 20 Years' Time

In 20 years' time, new skills, technologies, needs and demands, attitudes and values will have emerged in Kiribati. How successful we are as planners and decision makers, teachers and parents in preparing our children for those challenges depends on the education system we design.

A report from the Statistics department put out on Radio Kiribati recently says that by the year 2000 our population will be 85,000 and by the year 2020, according to a report by the UN (1998) on Asia and the Pacific into the 21st Century, Kiribati's population will reach 123,000. The problems we are facing now, especially in the primary schools, are already quite disturbing. For instance, about 1/3 of the teaching force is without teaching qualifications and, worse, the classes are getting too big, particularly on South Tarawa. With more people, naturally there will be even greater demands on the national resources to provide the basic needs, not only education but also health, food, shelter, and so forth. Unfortunately, we cannot expand our land, our country.

The geographical location of our islands and the great dispersal of our population, covering over 3 million square miles of water, make great demands on the education system today and will do for the next 20 years. It is essential to improve communication and transportation in order to bring about change in the schools.

The education policy clearly states the commitment of government by providing free primary and junior secondary education for all. The establishment of a College of Higher Education, recently proposed by the government, will further expand training opportunities. An increase of support grants would enable even more students to get into tertiary

institutions. Such expansion of opportunities is vital if Kiribati and the economy are to keep pace with the developments as well as improve people's lives.

Kiribati, with few natural resources except its people, has little choice but to invest in its human resources, not only in quantity but also in quality, by providing good education opportunities at all levels of the education system. These educational prospects rest very much on the ability to change attitudes and traditions about education and also the ability to provide and prepare for the changes to take place.

The rest of this paper highlights some possible educational prospects through developing partnerships, and suggest a new model for a College of Higher Education.

Educational Prospects Through Partnerships

Forming partnerships in a business entails equal rights, responsibilities and benefits. Undoubtedly, the success of a business depends on the support and commitment of the stakeholders.

The same principles apply when we form partnerships in education between the parents and teachers, between the school and community, between government and aid donors, and between government and NGOs. What is suggested is to have more collaboration between the providers and beneficiaries.

With the present system, the belief is that learning can only take place at school. Learning/teaching can only occur in a formal way and in a formal setting at school. Teachers are trained and hence qualified to teach our children. Generally, the parents have nothing to do except to ensure their children go to school with their exercise books and pencils.

Parents/Teachers Partnership

In 20 years' time, many parents will have at least a high school qualification. More parents will be able to help their children at home, so it will be quite natural for parents to want to share the teaching task with the teachers. But this will not be possible unless the prospects are realised and the conditions are set. For instance, school textbooks must be accessible to the parents, and parents' responsibility at school must be clearly stated in our policies. The merits of this new strategy are quite obvious. There will be more consultation between teachers and parents, a more interactive teaching consultation between teachers and parents, a more interactive teaching method will take place in the classrooms, focusing more on the individual than on the whole class. The schools will become learning centres where the individual will be encouraged to develop at her/his own pace. The parents and teachers will realise they both have complementary roles to play, as both will feel equally responsible for providing a strong education foundation during these early years of schooling. The parents should be as good as the teachers in the teaching of good attitudes and self-esteem, cultural and moral values, oral expression, problem solving, and reasoning ability. After all, this kind of training is what is going on, or should be, all the time at home.

Community/School Partnership

This can be realised only if the parents accept they are equally responsible for the education of their children. A school without the interest and support of its community is like someone without any sense of belonging. No wonder the schools, in particular the primary schools, are in such a sad state. It is because they do not belong to the people in the community. Sharing of ownership between school and members of the community may instil a sense of responsibility in the people

for their own educational growth. If we are not prepared for this partnership, very little can be done to improve the schools' conditions.

Government/Aid Donors Partnership

The provision of training awards, whether it be by government or aid donors, should be maximised in the best interest of the nation. A standard level of funding, whether the training takes place in Kiribati or elsewhere, should be adopted and the decision to utilise such funds be decided and controlled by one body. Where there are training programs available in the country or the region, these should be considered first before those offered elsewhere so that aid funds can be maximised. Eligibility should be competitive enough to ensure the best students get the awards.

There is definitely a need to expand the training opportunities to cater for the increasing needs and therefore, it is only proper to manage the limited funds well.

Government/NGOs Partnership

While it is widely accepted that it is the responsibility of government to provide education for all through the formal system, it must be realised that a lot of learning is also taking place outside the formal system by voluntary and non-government organisations (NGOs). This is what is known as non-formal education, where the setting is flexible, less structured, and definitely more aligned to the cultural context. Students experience more open learning through the use of a wide range of teaching techniques and approaches that are ignored in the formal setting of a formal system. Pre-schools, which have emerged through the goodwill of parents, is one example where this partnership has worked wonderfully well.

The church schools are another example. The government provides for the training of teachers, and the parents and community provide the rest. The School for the Handicapped is also run by voluntary workers, but needs stronger support from both the community, the government and aid donors. The training of teachers, leaders and coordinators of various organisations, youth groups, women's groups, fishermen and farmers, is essential to ensure effective running of such a wide range of educational programs which may be more meaningful in meeting the training and educational development of the people.

Recognition of educational programs offered by NGOs should be reflected in government policies, through budgetary commitment. After all, many of these educational programs, in particular the youth programs, are based on development of cultural values and attitudes, skills and talents to enable the individual to develop and live a good and useful life as a member of the family and community at large.

Amalgamation of All National Post-Secondary Institutions: A Model to Consider

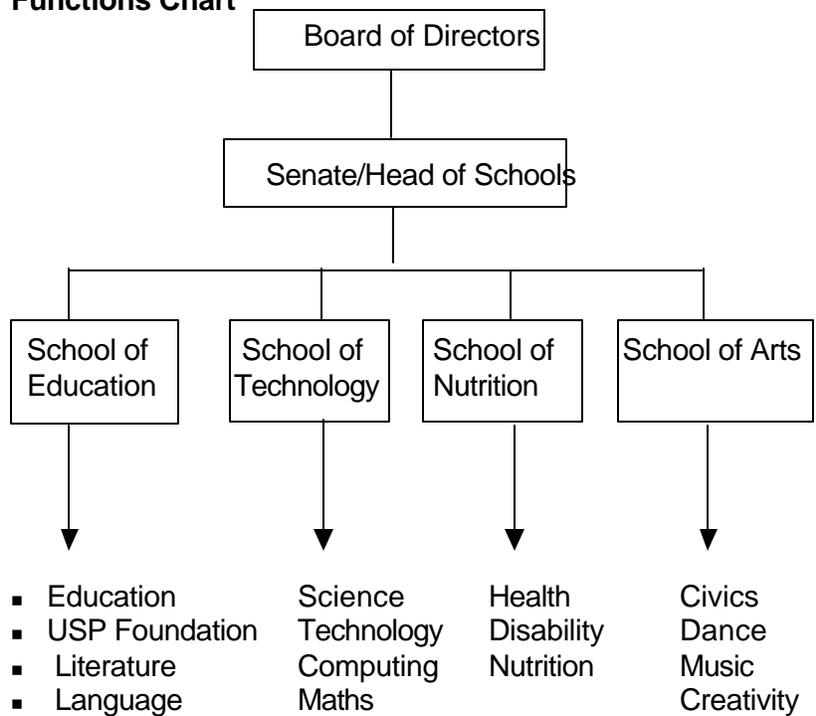
A review of these institutions is probably long overdue. The institutions referred to are those controlled and financed by government, namely KTC, TTI and the Nursing School and other small training units. To amalgamate these training institutions under one management system will naturally bring about change. There will be no competition over the same resources, no duplication of courses, and no belittling of each other. What is expected is a lot more cooperation and collaboration academically and institutionally, and a lot more sharing and understanding between the staff and the department. The planning, development and coordination for long term benefits will be more coherent, systematic and better managed. The students will move around the different

campuses and share the same resources. Naturally, the teaching periods will extend throughout the whole day. This amalgamation could result in the first College of Advanced Education for Kiribati as proposed in the government policy statement, *Ana Kai Ni Baire Tautaeka* 1999-2000.

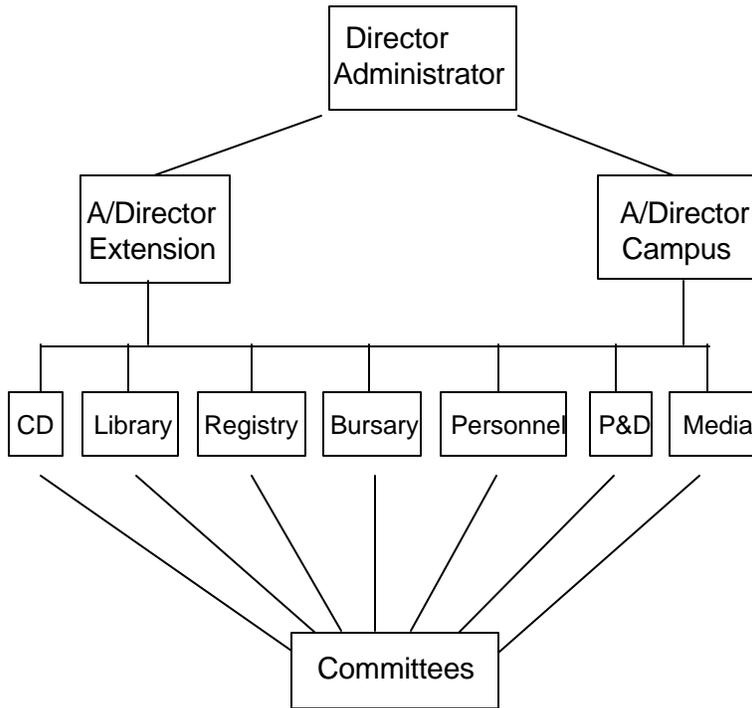
A possible organisational structure is shown in Figure 1. Courses and programmes of study could be tailored to the training needs from time to time.

Figure 1: Kiribati College of Advanced Education – A Proposed Organisational Structure

Functions Chart



Administration Chart



The college should operate with some degree of autonomy. It should try to adopt a more “business culture approach” as is the trend now for many higher education institutions worldwide. Hence, it should try to embrace corporate planning and management, privatisation, user pays and more accountability. There should be a continuing search for strategies to increase productivity and cost effectiveness. (Solofa: 1997: 24).

Some students may get sponsorship, while many more would be private students. Residential colleges are expensive to run. Therefore, to reduce the cost, students should be responsible for their own accommodation. This is where the private sectors could be encouraged to set up students’

hostels. At the end of the training, graduates would be responsible for marketing their own skills in their own ways.

While higher enrolment is envisaged, at the same time high quality service should be possible through better financing and management systems. In addition, as students are partly responsible for their studies, a high pass rate will be expected. The college could increase its enrolment even further by adopting flexible strategies within its system.

Flexible and Open Learning Delivery Approach

Fallow and Robinson (1995:87) describe the methodology of open learning as one which requires interactive learning materials delivered in print or through electronic media. These represent the students' principal learning and teaching resource rather than the lecturer providing this function. The learning thus becomes an independent activity rather than a class activity. The teacher/lecturer supports the open learning materials and complements the learning process. This approach also places substantial demands on the student who must display significant self-motivation, drive and appropriate study skills.

Given the rapid growth of our population and their great dispersal, and the need to increase the number of graduates at a greater rate, especially the teachers and nurses, it is imperative that our education system includes such innovative approaches to teaching and learning. A good example is the USP's distance education model, whereby programmes consist mainly of printed materials and audio-cassettes. The advantages of this system are many but more significant are its long term cost-effectiveness and accessibility to the scattered population.

The statistics for the USP Centre compared to the Kiribati post-secondary institutions demonstrate some merits of the

distance education mode over a conventional delivery system. Such differences can be seen in the enrolment, staffing and programs offered.

Institution	Enrolment	Staffing	Programmes
KTC	200	12	Pre-school, primary, JSS
TTI	1081	23	A wide range of tech skills
Nursing	30	5	Nursing & Obstetric
MTC	90	5	Seamanship
FTC	23	5	Fishing skills
USP	1388	3	A wide range of programmes

Source: 1. Digest of Education Statistics 1998
2. USP Centre Annual Report 1998
3. Interviews

In a Report on National Seminar on Population and Development (1996) by the Ministry of Health and Family Planning, the question was raised whether “ Education for All” was an attainable goal in the light of the growing population. Two recommendations were made: i) there should be a sufficient number of qualified teachers and ii) that there should be an improvement in the number and quality of teaching materials and infrastructure.

Molnar (1995:139) in her study for UNESCO, referred to the Thailand conference on “Education for All” in 1990, which asserted that “traditional approaches to education would have difficulty meeting the needs for a basic education for all (let alone tertiary education), and suggested that consideration be given to non-conventional delivery systems such as radio to create learning environments inside and outside the classroom”.

While it may be unwise to be carried away by the capability of modern information technology, the use of print materials and the radio, the two technologies already available and capable of reaching out to almost all the remote communities, should be explored.

One-way radio has been widely used to improve educational quality since the early 1970s, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Its effectiveness and affordability has been cited on numerous occasions. School broadcasts were introduced in Kiribati at about the same time and are continuing for the primary schools. Their usefulness, let alone effectiveness, has not been established. The use of radio at tertiary level may prove highly beneficial if it is well supported by printed materials and weekly tutorials at learning centres.

It should also be possible to identify a number of areas where there is the potential for using distance education to support educational programmes through the radio. Non-formal education programmes for the rural population, in-service training for teachers and other professional workers, programmes for the youths, to name just a few, should be explored and their accessibility expanded for further training and education opportunities.

The success of flexible learning in distance education depends not only on the system itself but, more importantly, on the learners and the providers themselves. The learners must have the commitment to their studies and a high motivation to succeed, and the providers must have the appropriate professional and technical skills to effectively use this mode of delivery. There are also other problems to take into account, such as the lack of communication systems on the outer islands, unavailability of mail and telephone in the communities, compounded with the transportation problems.

Despite these problems, the advantages and benefits of distance education to the learners far exceed the cost it entails.

The College/USP Collaboration

While it may not be viable to set up a national university in the next 20 years, there are many possibilities that could be considered to take full advantage of the USP and its Centre. The kinds and extent of collaboration are clearly stated in the USP Strategic Plan for the 4th Decade:

The USP welcomes the teaching of its courses by national post-secondary institutions provided its quality standards are met ...

The USP will continue to work with national post-secondary institutions to assist in quality assurance where appropriate ...

The USP will set up a separate structure with staff dedicated to the teaching at pre-degree levels and will continue to be closely involved in curriculum development and quality assurance ...

Credit transfer agreements should be possible between the USP and the College. (USP 1998:22)

The college, therefore, should be encouraged to adopt training courses from other training institutions, in particular from the USP, and fit them into its programmes. It may also be cheaper to buy training packages than to develop their own programmes. For instance, the College may run the USP Preliminary, Foundation and Vocational courses, leaving the USP Centre to run higher degree programmes. This will not only ease the resource constraints felt at the USP Centre now,

but also would significantly reduce the cost of these programs and at the same time reduce government per student contribution to the USP.

The setting up of an independent net at the USP Centre which will provide a 24-hour voice and data link may open up other possibilities for college students, such as the use of the library facilities to access the USP Library database, the email link with the teaching staff and access to the satellite tutorials.

Financing Future Expansion

It is quite evident that the system would result in greater financial costs to be shared between the providers and learners. Some would be more obvious than others. The reality is that not all parents would be able to afford it, in particular those without a regular income. However, there are parents who do have the means. To ensure equality of opportunity, it is important to put in place a funding formula whereby talented students are not denied the right to higher education opportunity. Therefore, other sources of funds should be considered. Some suggestions would include setting up:

- College of Foundation through the Alumni
- College Trust Fund
- Government-assisted student loan scheme
- Work-study programme

The College would also be encouraged to generate its own revenue each year through consultancy, projects, sales of publications, hire of facilities, fees and fines, etc. and this would be stated clearly in its annual estimate.

Conclusion

Effecting change is not easy, particularly the changing of attitudes and traditions, let alone changing a system that depends on collaborative efforts. However, it is important that attempts are made to try to translate some of these discussions into action plans and to focus on them over the next 20 years. I do feel there is nothing impossible if there is a genuine desire and commitment by all parties concerned, in particular by the Ministry of Education, to lay out a new map to follow, not only to improve access and opportunity to higher education but also to provide quality education and training for the people at large.

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